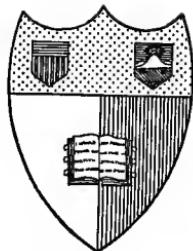


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Follies



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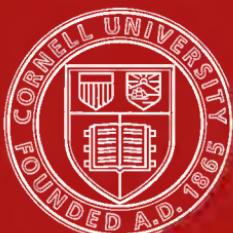
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ETHEL MILDMAY'S FOLLIES.

A STORY.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "PETITE'S ROMANCE."



BOSTON:
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ETHEL MILD MAY'S FOLLIES.

CHAPTER I.

A DEEP cloudless sky, and a shining sea beneath; bold mountains all around, deluged in a wonderful glow, with here and there a snowy peak glistening in the distance; a white town sparkling like a jewel in the case; brightness everywhere, shadow nowhere; sunshine, warmth, and intense color; the song of birds, and the perfume of flowers. And yet it is mid-winter, but winter in Nice, with the Mediterranean breaking in opal waves upon the beach, and the southern sun laughing January to scorn, and the great Alps calmly looking on.

It was the afternoon; and all the world had breakfasted, and dressed itself, and was now sauntering up and down the celebrated "Promenade des Anglais," — a gayly-colored, joyous procession, chattering noisily in various tongues; and looking on, and gayly commenting upon the lively panorama, were two men, sitting a little apart, and shading themselves from the scorching sun with the friendly assistance of an enormous white umbrella lined with green.

They were Frenchmen; and, of course, they were diverting themselves at their neighbors' expense, — diverting themselves with redoubled vigor and enjoyment when the victim of the moment happened to be an Englishman, — the Frenchman's legitimate butt. Nothing, indeed, escaped this sharp-eyed, keen-witted pair; not the burly paterfamilias with his hands clasping his pockets, as though scenting thieves in the sunny air, and with irascible curses about his mouth, and suspicious gleams in his eyes, — sure tokens of daily tussles with swindling hotel-keepers and dishonest carriers; not the irreproachably "got up" swell tourist, calmly stalking along with a serene, ineffable expression of self-content and

superiority; not even the British matron, with her virtuous, *solid* air; nor the British virgin, with her sealskin jacket and "Grenadier" march, so different from the dainty pitter-patter of her French sister; nobody was allowed to pass unscathed. A running fire of light, delightful railing, such as the French nation, and the French nation alone, thoroughly understands, was skilfully levelled at each new, unconscious passer-by, to the apparent intense enjoyment of our friends.

"And yet, *mon cher*," presently observed the elder of the two, — a white-headed, parchment-complexioned, soldier-like looking man, checking himself in the midst of a gay thrust at some British "eccentricity," as he chose to consider it, which had just passed them, — "and yet there are no women like the English in the world, laugh at them as you will. Even I, a Frenchman, confess it. They are well-grown, clear-skinned, fair as lilies; a little stiff and awkward, I grant you, and with manners rigid and cold to an excess; nevertheless, there is a 'something' *distingué* and *digne* about them, which I, for one, cannot help admiring in spite of myself."

"Bravo, baron! I declare that the subject makes you eloquent. What would madame la baronne say to your unpatriotic rhapsodies, I wonder," said his companion, a young man with a brand-new suit of remarkably tight clothes, and dainty lavender gloves.

"Bah! the baronne is a sensible woman, and does not trouble her head on such matters," said the gay old gentleman, with a laugh. "Besides, she is *dévote* now, and has buried jealousy and all other bad passions long ago."

"And has given up the task of reforming you, you hoary old reprobate, I suppose! Well, baron, I disagree with you, and am

ready to back my countrywomen against all other women in the world," replied the young man, complacently tapping his neat bright boots with a smart little cane. "I will back them for grace, for beauty, for *esprit*, for"—

"For the domestic virtues, *mon cher*?" suggested the baron; "eh, count?"

"For every virtue under the sun. Come, baron, don't *dénigrer* your own nation."

"Nor you yours. My dear O'Neil, I declare that I sometimes entirely forget that you are an Englishman.—ha, ha!" laughed the baron, enjoying his retort.

"But I am not. Irish, which is more French than English, you know, if you will; that is to say *half*,—only *half* Irish."

"My word of honor! I, for my part, would be whole Irish, or whole Hottentot, or whole any thing under the sun, at the same price, my dear fellow, I assure you. Your inheritance is large, enormous; is it not? The world says so, at all events."

"And, for a wonder, it is right," replied O'Neil. "But then one has to wait,—to wait such an eternity! I have been waiting ever since the day I was born," he concluded dolefully. "The old imbecile! He still persists in living."

"Wonderful!" ejaculated the baron.

"Yes, wonderful. That Irish air must contain the elixir of life!" said O'Neil with a melancholy laugh. "And, meanwhile, my dear baron, meanwhile, life is difficult, nay, impossible, a burden! My mother and I subsist on an income so narrow, so mean, such a pittance, that, in short, life is, as I say, a burden." And the young man really looked overwhelmed by his misfortunes.

"But your expectations, my friend," suggested his companion,—"surely they are good for something. Money might be raised"—

"Yes; but the Jews and all that *canaille* have got as tired of waiting as I have myself. Besides, there is this nightmare of another claimant to the property, as you know,—this unlucky uncle of mine,—which makes them rather chary of their kind offices; though, of course, there is no doubt of the ultimate result."

There was a little pause after this, which was presently interrupted abruptly by the baron. "If the Jews fail, there remain the women," he said gayly. "Why don't you marry, my friend?"

O'Neil shrugged his shoulders. "It does not smile upon me, I confess," he said, laughing. "My mother is always dinnin' marriage into my ears; but, between you and me, I have not much inclination that way. At my age to be fettered"—

"Bah! The fetters are light enough, *mon cher*. Chains of roses, to be poetical."

"Poetical, yes; truthful, no. You and I know better than that, baron. You see, it should be an heiress"—

"Indubitably. I am not a fool."

"And heiresses are so constantly plain; and plain women, my dear baron"— And the young man made an expressive grimace. "Provide me with a young, graceful, and pretty one, and *puis nous verrons*. Mademoiselle Belfort, upon whom my mother has fixed her eye, is rich, it is true; but she is hideous, and big as that mountain over there. I am incapable of the sacrifice," he concluded, laughing.

"The baronne was an heiress certainly," observed the baron, after a thoughtful pause; and perhaps he spoke a little ruefully. "*Tiens!*" he exclaimed, suddenly starting to his feet: "there go M. le Colonel and his pretty daughter." And the old gentleman executed a lively *pas* across the path to the edge of the carriage-road, and stood there, violently flourishing his hat to a lady and gentleman who were riding past.

"Pray who are your friends, baron?" inquired O'Neil, when presently the old gentleman had, in a more sober fashion, returned to his side. "Their faces are new to me."

"Probably. They are recent arrivals." Then suddenly giving him a sharp tap on the shoulder, "An idea strikes me, my friend,—a wonderful idea," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Count, you owe me eternal gratitude. You are under an obligation to me which you will never, *never*, be able to repay. I have done your *besogne* already. There is your *future*!" And the gay old gentleman pointed with his stick in the direction of the receding figures of the equestrians.

"My *future*! In Heaven's name, what do you mean, baron? Who is she? What is she? How?"

"She is the 'necessity' which you have just been so clearly demonstrating to me, *mon cher*. She is the wife who is to transform the burden of life into a joy. She is the heiress for whom, three minutes ago, you were asking me. At least, *I believe* she is an heiress," added the baron, checking the flow of his eloquence. "Of course, one would make inquiries, you know, my friend!"

O'Neil laughed. "Ah! you are afraid of raising my hopes too high, I perceive. Well, but who is she? What is she? At least tell me that."

"*Peste!* What more can I tell you than your own eyes can tell you, count?"

Did you not see that she is young, pretty, charming?" —

"I have not seen her at all. I did not look," interrupted O'Neil, with a careless shrug.

A remark to which the baron paid no manner of attention. "And she is as good and innocent as she is pretty and charming," he went on enthusiastically. "Miss Ethel is quite a pet of mine. Poor child! I tell it to you in confidence, O'Neil, she will soon be an orphan; for her father, who is here for his health, will be dead in six months. These Englishmen are rich; their souls are made of fine gold-dust. Several eminent chemists have assured me of the fact. But to continue, the colonel adores his child. She is the only one, and — lately I have detected it — he is uneasy with regard to her future. They do not seem to have near relations; at least I never hear them mentioned. Were he to find a son-in-law to suit him, he would doubtless die happier and easier, poor devil! Why should not that son-in-law be you, count? Your family, of the nobility of which you are continually assuring me, and your splendid expectations, would recommend you to the father, and —"

"And what would be my recommendations to mademoiselle; eh, baron?" inquired O'Neil, with a conceited little laugh. "I have heard that these English girls are not guided by their parents' leading-strings in such matters."

"No; certainly not. Miss Ethel, for one, would not: at all events, I can answer for that," said the baron, laughing.

"What! a will of her own? Sounds troublesome," and O'Neil lay back on the seat with a lazy yawn.

"What would be your recommendation to her?" repeated the baron, heedless of the interruption, with a sly smile. "I know what you expect me to say, my modest friend; but I never pay compliments to men. What I do say is, '*Audace, audace, et encore de l'audace.*' I have not yet met the woman whom it will not, in the long-run, subdue and win. Besides, it is quite in your own line, count," he added, with a gleeful chuckle.

"Thank you, baron; but is it worth while, I wonder? *Le jeu vaut-il la chandelle?* Heavens! What on earth ails you that you can't sit still an instant?" demanded O'Neil irascibly, as the baron gave another sudden bound, and prepared for a second plunge across the pathway.

"Come along! Here they are again," he cried. "At least this time give yourself the trouble to see." And he was gone.

O'Neil looked after him with a supercilious smile; but he did something else besides smile. He stood up and shook himself, and threw away the end of his cigar, and then, slowly and deliberately, followed in the baron's steps, placed himself beside him at the extreme edge of the pathway, and sticking his glass in his eye, and crossing his arms upon his breast, took up a post of observation.

"Brava!" whispered the baron approvingly. There was time for no more. At that very instant the riders, now retracing their steps slowly up the Promenade, came to a full stop right in front of the two gentlemen.

"Good-day, baron," said a fresh, pleasant young voice. "And how goes the world with you?" And the speaker bent down in her saddle, and presented the baron with a small, white-gloved hand.

"Wherever you are, Miss Ethel, the world goes always well," was the prompt and gallant reply, accompanied by a profound bow.

"Does it?" And Ethel laughed gayly. "The speech sounds pretty, baron; but I am afraid it is not true. Just now, in spite of my good company, papa is grumbling. He complains of the sharp wind, and of the hot sun, and of every thing. And he says that he is tired; and so our ride has come to an untimely end, and we have to go home." And the girl glanced regretfully at the bright scene around her.

"The colonel is right, though. In another twenty minutes, our friend the sun will have set. The change is to be felt already," replied the baron, tightening his great woollen comforter carefully round his throat. "Alas, Miss Ethel, we are not all as young and as strong as you, and for invalids"—

"But papa is not an invalid," interrupted Miss Mildmay. "Every day he grows stronger. Is it not true, papa, that Nice has done wonders for you already?"

"Wonders," replied her father, with a grave, sad smile. "At least, so you say, Ethel."

"But it is a fact. Now, baron, is it not clear as noonday that he is not the same man as he was a fortnight ago, when we came here first?" And the young girl gave the baron an appealing glance.

Of course the old gentleman could not but agree to this, and say, "Yes; to be sure, it was a fact. But," he added, "caution is the better part of valor; and this afternoon this confounded north wind makes one feel as though one's chest were

made of paper." And he glanced uneasily at Col. Mildmay's drooping figure.

"Well, we are going, going, gone!" Ethel said. "*Au revoir*, baron. Come and see me soon, or I shall die of *ennui*. By the way, where are my violets? Has madame grown jealous at last, and put a veto upon the sweet little bouquets?" she inquired, looking over her shoulder with a malicious smile.

"For shame, Miss Ethel! The baronne, as you know, shares my devoted admiration, and sings your praises incessantly. The violets? Here they are, to be sure. It was this abominable *tramontane* which put them out of my head. Here is your bouquet, mademoiselle, fragrant and sweet, yet not half fragrant or sweet enough for you." And the gallant old gentleman held out a little bunch of fresh violets, which he had just snatched from the basket of a passing flower-girl, for Miss Mildmay's acceptance.

"Thank you, baron! You see I am determined not to let you off. Ah, what a pity!" as, just as her fingers were clasping the flowers, her horse made a sudden swerve, and they fell to the ground, and were, the next instant, trampled in the dust. "What a pity!" she repeated, looking down at the unlucky little bouquet, which an instant had despoiled of all its freshness and beauty.

"They can be replaced. Mademoiselle, will you allow me the honor?" And Count O'Neil stepped forward suddenly and eagerly, and with another and larger bouquet.

Miss Mildmay extended her hand, then half drew it back again, looking surprised and pleased and uncertain all at once. It was an awkward moment; but the baron came most opportunely to the rescue. "Miss Mildmay; Count Ernest O'Neil," he said, hastily presenting them. Then, as it were an explanatory, and to the colonel, he added, "My friend the count much desires the honor of your acquaintance, colonel."

Col. Mildmay bowed: so did O'Neil; and meanwhile the violets had found their way into Ethel's hands.

"Many thanks, monsieur le comte," she said, with a bend of her pretty fair head, as she followed her father, who had already moved away.

"Well done, *mon cher*! Brava! brava!" exclaimed the baron as soon as the riders were at a safe distance, and clapping the young man on the back. "Nothing could be better for a beginning. Ha, ha! O'Neil, you did not need my counsel, I

perceive, — '*Audace, audace, et encore de l'audace!*'" And the old gentleman laughed gleefully and approvingly.

A few minutes later, Ethel and her father had threaded their way through the gay crowds which thronged the Promenade, and were slowly riding along the quiet road towards the villa in which they lived. The baron was right. Already the short-lived brightness of the day had almost faded, the sun was setting in a gorgeous sky, and the sharp evening chill was penetrating the air. Now and then Col. Mildmay coughed and shivered, and Ethel glanced at him furtively and a little anxiously. They were almost silent. Perhaps they were busy with their thoughts, or perhaps they were influenced by the serene stillness of the quiet country road, which was such a sharp and sudden contrast to the grudy and noisy display of the Promenade. At last they reached home.

"I wonder who that gentleman is whom the baron presented to us just now, papa?" Ethel remarked, then speaking for almost the first time since they had left it. "Count Ernest O'Neil, I think he called him. An odd name, and — rather a pretty name too," she added thoughtfully.

"It is an Irish name. I once knew people called O'Neil," her father answered. "If this be one of the same family, I shall be glad to know him. We must catechise our friend the baron on the subject." And the colonel dismounted, and hastened into the house to bright fires and well-warmed rooms, — elements which, even in Nice, are very necessary to the comfort and well-being of mankind.

But his daughter lingered behind him upon the broad stone terrace which ran along two sides of the villa, leaning against the marble balustrade, and gazing across the valley, filled with the gray olive-trees, to the little rising hills, and, beyond, to the great solemn mountains, purple and beautiful in the evening sun. It was not till the last streak of color had faded from the sky, and the short twilight had settled upon the subdued and quiet earth, that she remembered that it was cold, and rousing herself with a short, restless sigh, turned towards the house. The villa was comfortable and well warmed certainly, — at least part of it was, — a big white house, with long rows of green-shuttered windows, and commanding a view not easily to be surpassed; but then it was more than half empty. Those countless windows belonged to countless rooms, — bright, airy, meagrely-furnished, uninhabited, desolate rooms. The house could with ease have lodged two or three large families;

and Ethel and her father and their servants were stowed away in a corner, and were totally out of proportion to the immensity of the place. And then, if it was big, it was also dull, — desperately dull, — Ethel thought, mentally anticipating the long, long evening before her, during which her father, her sole companion, would cough and shiver, and read the newspapers, and perhaps play a game of chess or backgammon; and she would yawn, and skim a novel, and fiddle with her work, and feel herself dreadfully bored and rather aggrieved.

And meanwhile all the world would be wildly amusing itself a few paces off. Rumors of balls, *fêtes*, and amusements of all kinds and descriptions, reached the villa readily enough. The baron, their one acquaintance at Nice, and a sort of local perambulating "Morning Post," never failed to impart his budget of gay intelligence during his almost daily visit; but that was all. Ethel heard enough; but hearing only, when it is unaccompanied by participation, is apt to pall before long, and the girl was beginning to weary of hearing, and to wish for something more, — to wish, indeed, and to want very ardently.

She wanted to have her sip of the cup of pleasure too. At nineteen, it is decidedly tantalizing to be only in the stage-boxes, when one is longing to be on the stage, and taking part in the fun that is going forward: at least, so Ethel Mildmay was thinking on this bright, crisp January evening, as many another young lady of her age has thought before her. For Ethel, be it known in due time, though the heroine of a romance, is by no means a faultless or peculiarly heroic sort of personage, as, indeed, will soon be made pretty clear to those who take an interest in her.



CHAPTER II.

THE next morning, as, according to his invariable custom, Baron de Nérac was sunning himself upon the Promenade, he heard an eager step in pursuit; and, turning round, he was accosted by Count O'Neil.

"My dear baron, I was sure that I should meet you!" the young man exclaimed breathlessly.

"Were you, my dear count? I can't say as much to you. Generally you are not such an early bird," replied the baron, passing his arm through that of his young friend.

"No, indeed! I hold early rising in just

abhorrence. But for a motive one does any thing; and to-day I feel myself capable of wonders. Baron, I have consulted my mother. Her views are mine. We have made up our minds, and now the affair is in your hands. For Heaven's sake carry it through without delay!"

"What? How? What affair?" exclaimed the baron, his voice growing louder with surprise every instant.

"That of my marriage, of course. The more I think of the project, the more it smiles upon me. Since yesterday, I seem to myself to have become a different man. In short, baron, my desire is, to proceed to business at once."

His companion burst out laughing. "Bravo, my young friend!" he exclaimed. "So the little god has chosen to play his pranks upon *you* now. I give you my word of honor that I had not the remotest notion that you were so inflammable, — a volcano, in fact. I declare I am afraid of remaining near you, lest I should catch fire myself! Why, Vesuvius is nothing to you! Ha, ha, ha!" And the old man went on laughing as though he would presently burst his sides.

But his hilarity in nowise disconcerted O'Neil. "Laugh away!" he said good-humoredly; "but you are pledged to assist me for all that."

"So you like the little English demoiselle?" soliloquized the baron presently, when he had somewhat recovered his composure.

"Like her? She is charming, adorable!" interrupted O'Neil impetuously. "Her smile is ravishing; and I always swear by a woman's smile. Baron, I tell you that I am resolved."

"Softly, softly, my young friend! — Poor O'Neil!" he compassionated maliciously. "So you have been shot right through the heart. And, pray, what has become of your rooted aversion to English women?"

"And does not the exception prove the rule? Miss?"

"Ethel," observed the baron.

"Ethel? Confound it! what a barbarous name! Well, she is, as I say, charming. Such soft, sweet eyes! Such splendid hair! By the way, do you think it is all her own, baron?" he inquired uneasily.

"Every bit of it. Of that I have had ocular proof. I caught her one day *en robe de chambre*."

"Wonderful! Delightful! And now what of her disposition and temper? My mother naturally is anxious on that score. But I need not ask. Goodness and amiability are written in her face."

"Ahem! Miss Ethel is not, I should say a lamb exactly. High spirits, — a will of her own, I fancy. But you are not afraid, count, surely? A woman who loves is already tamed." And the baron smiled, looking at the young man out of the corners of his eyes.

"Afraid? I? It was on my mother's account I made the question. She—ahem! — requires to be humored a little, you know. Yet I am convinced that a daughter-in-law who was not a nonentity would suit her better than one who was. She would despise a fool. She will love a clever, amiable girl. For, of course, she is both clever and amiable, and —"

"Tut, tut! Moderate your adjectives, my friend. Miss Ethel is perfect, I grant it all to you."

"Well, then, nothing remains to be considered but ways and means. I think, baron, you told me yesterday that her *dot* is considerable."

"Don't think: it only wastes time. And, to judge by the pace you are proceeding, time seems to be an object."

"But you did tell me."

"I told you what I supposed. I don't *know* any thing; but I can make out, of course. Nothing simpler than to ask her father."

"Admirable! A thousand thanks! But, of course, you will make the necessary inquiries cautiously, without compromising me. I leave it all to you. I trust you implicitly. You know that you are a born diplomat."

"Much obliged for the compliment." But, though it was satirically said, the old man was, nevertheless, flattered. "So you have retained a scrap of your senses, after all," he said, with a dry little laugh. "It is to be a marriage of reason, as well as of inclination?"

"Unfortunately, every thing resolves itself into necessity," replied O'Neil with perfect simplicity, and either unconscious or heedless of his companion's covert satire. "It is the one great moving power which animates all mortals. Marriage is not a necessity to me; but, if I once embark in it, money is. Baron, you have it all at your fingers'-ends. Were you not once in the same position yourself?"

A question which effectually disarmed the baron. Everybody knew that he had been poor, and that the baroness had been rich; that he had been handsome, and that she had been plain. The baron was romantic in theory; but in practice he was just like the rest of the world. And so, after a little pause, he said, with a good-hu-

mored laugh, "Well, well, I like candor, at all events. At least, with a candid, person one can see without spectacles. Since I am unfortunately responsible for the first suggestion of the affair, — a suggestion which, by the way, I had not the remotest suspicion would have the effect of a lighted match applied to gunpowder, — I will assist you so far as I can. That is to say, I will sound the colonel, and give you the result of my soundings."

"And after that, for I feel confident that the results will be satisfactory, you will do something more, baron," said O'Neil, waxing more and more elated and excited every instant. "We will owe every thing to you. You will bring us together. You will give us opportunities of meeting. You will present me at their house — you —"

"O Lord! give me breathing time!" gasped the baron imploringly.

O'Neil laughed; and, while he was laughing, De Nérac fairly made his escape, taking refuge upon the arm of a passing friend. O'Neil could not get another word out of him. The baron sedulously avoided another *tête-à-tête*, and presently went home, still under safe protection.

There was nothing for O'Neil to do but to follow his example, which he did, not so ill satisfied, after all, with his morning's work. His project was, at least, put in motion now. A little patience was requisite; but he knew the baron to be a good-natured old man and an inveterate match-maker, and so felt secure and confident.

As he had good reason for doing. The baron was better than his word, and the very next day brought him the desired report, — a satisfactory one. The figure, if not enormous, was high enough. Nobody had been compromised; no names mentioned; the baron had been caution itself. "The affair had been quite simple," he told his two listeners; for it was in Madame O'Neil's tiny *salon* that he was speaking, and that lady, a handsome, stately woman, with black eyes and hair, and a cold, pale face, was present, as well as her son. "The affair was quite simple," said the baron. "I see the colonel every day. Last evening, I paid him a long visit. Luckily mademoiselle was absent, roaming about the garden. It seems that she is romantic, and likes the moonlight. Well, the conversation was easily turned in the desired direction. Englishmen are always ready to speak of money: they like the smell of it, the sound of it. A few discreet questions, carelessly put, elicited all I wanted to know. He even became confidential, for *him*; that is to say, he is a reserved man naturally. But, from one or

two words which dropped from him, I could perceive that I had been correct in my surmises. He is anxious that his daughter should marry soon. Poor devil! He knows that his protection will, before long, be withdrawn from her."

A little thoughtful pause ensued, which was presently broken by O'Neil. "Then no time is to be lost," he exclaimed impetuously. "Mother, you have already consented; and now what remains but that the baron should crown his kindness by submitting our proposals to Col. Mildmay?"

"The sooner the better. This very day, this very hour!"

"Aheu — thank you! I would rather not," responded the baron dryly. "I have no fancy to be kicked downstairs by the colonel, or rather, since, in his present state of health, he is incapable of so much exertion, by the tall, broad-shouldered, muscular Briton, his footman." And the old Frenchman gave a low chuckle of amusement.

"What do you mean?" demanded mother and son together; and Madame O'Neil drew herself up.

"I confess, that, in my opinion, my son is entitled to aspire to" — she began.

"To a princess of the blood royal," interrupted the baron unceremoniously and a little impatiently. "Of course, he is: we all know that. Come, come, madame, I meant no offence: but you see, these English are not accustomed to our ways and manners; and were your son a prince himself, yet I fancy that the colonel would listen but coldly to such an off-hand proposition. I am acquainted with the nation; and, to be candid with you, he would simply consider it a piece of audacious impudence. No, no! when we are in Rome, we do as the Romans do. The count desires to marry an English girl. Well, then, let him woo her after the English fashion. He made an excellent beginning yesterday. Let him but continue in the same path, and in a fortnight the battle, doubtless, will have been won. Miss Ethel's ingenuous heart is there to be given; but not for the asking merely. That is my advice; follow it or not, as you please."

"But how is it to be done? What opportunities have I?" inquired O'Neil in a melancholy yet a flattered tone. "I have met her nowhere. She does not go into society."

"That could be managed," observed Madame O'Neil thoughtfully; "at a friend's house, for instance" — And then she paused.

The baron fidgeted uneasily in his seat, and took up his hat, which he had deposited

on the floor, between his legs. But, poor man, there was no escape for him: his meddlesome good nature had doomed him; he was caught in the toils of his own weaving. "To be sure, nothing simpler!" cried O'Neil. "At a friend's house, of course,—baron" —

"But Miss Ethel goes nowhere: her father is too delicate, and she has no chaperon, no companion," interrupted De Nérac in all haste. "These Englishmen are" —

"But she would go to — to your house," interrupted O'Neil. "Considering her intimacy with you and the baronne, it would be quite *convenable*, even if her father were unable to accompany her. A small *soirée*, — twenty people, lemonade, orangeade, cakes, a little music. You know that Madame de Nérac excels in the sort of thing. Miss Ethel goes — I go — she sees me — I see her — in evening dress, and by candlelight, which is an advantage. My mother, also, would see her, and *après*" —

"Yes, *après*," put in the baron dryly.

"Afterwards it is all plain sailing; at least" —

"Oh! pray do not allow any misgivings to trouble you, my friend; as you have mounted the high horse, you had better stick to it. Granted that with you to be seen is to have conquered. But where is the scene of the victory laid? in what house" —

"In yours, of course. You are our single mutual friend."

"Ahem! But" —

Then the baron hesitated, feeling, good-natured creature that he was, that it was difficult to say no, and that yet he would not say yes. But neither mother nor son was abashed by his very apparent discomfiture. O'Neil's eagerness and ardor made him oblivious of anybody's desires and interests but his own; and Madame O'Neil, though not oblivious, but, on the contrary, very clear-sighted and wide awake, was yet a woman to whom life had been a struggle, and to whom either nature or experience, or perhaps both, had taught the fact that means are of very little importance in comparison to ends. And so she sat there quite calmly, her great black eyes pitilessly watching the baron's hesitation and embarrassment, and, as easily as though his countenance were an open book, reading the signs which it betrayed; reading how he was thinking of the baronne (of whom, by the way, the world gave him credit of living not a little in awe), and of what she would say to the notion of the *soirée*; reading how he was calling to mind that his wife did not like her, Madame O'Neil, and

that an invitation for her would probably cost the unfortunate man a domestic battle royal; reading how he was trembling at the vista of responsibilities and consequences,—the direct result of his bringing the two young people together,—which was suddenly presenting itself to his mind's eye; reading these and many other things as well: but she did not care a rush. The chance of an advantageous marriage had offered itself for her son, and it must not be lightly lost. Besides, the foolish youth was in love, or thought he was, which is the same thing; and his mother's heart yearned for him, and bled to see him happy, and felt no compassion at all for the possible risks to the baron's peace and composure, whether mental or domestic or social. What, indeed, did they weigh in the balance? she asked herself, or rather did not ask herself; for the question never so much as occurred to her. Her convictions were much too firmly grounded to be disturbed by such useless queries. The meaning of wanting a thing, was to get it; to wish for, to obtain. It was a trifle which she, or rather her son, wanted now; but, trifle as it was, it should be his.

And so she sat surveying the baron, with a half-smile upon her lips, and presently she opened them, shrugging her shoulders, with, as it were, a compassionate, pitiful shrug. "Poor fellow! Baron, what it is to be young! But you are so kind, so good, so sympathetic to youth! Surely you will help him; will you not?"

An appeal which, made as it was, very softly and sweetly, it was beyond the baron's strength altogether to resist.

"Yes, madame, of course I am willing to assist our young friend,—in reason, that is. And, after all, a *soirée* may be given at my house, and a young man may meet a young lady there, and it does not follow that the host is answerable for the consequences. Not that I say a *soirée shall* be given," he said, suddenly checking himself; "that is the baronne's province, in which I never interfere. Her house is her own. She sees her friends when she chooses, and those whom she chooses," he added, with meaning emphasis and a dignified wave of his hat.

"Of course, of course," said Madame O'Neil suavely; "but she is too devoted a wife not to follow your desires. Baron, we all know, that, to the baronne, your wishes are laws."

A statement, which, if not perfectly true, was at least adroit and diplomatic. "She adores you," put in O'Neil, following his

mother's lead fervently. "Poor woman! Baron, you know that she is a great, great deal too fond of you for her own peace of mind. Poor, poor woman!"

"Ah, you sly rogue, what do you mean?" demanded De Nérac, looking delighted; for, indeed, nothing pleased him better than such harmless, gallant insinuations. That the baronne adored him, and was wildly jealous, was one of the pleasant little chimeras of his life, in which nobody, not even himself, except in imaginative moments, believed. "You sly rogue! wait till you have been married forty years yourself, and see what you'll have to say for yourself. The baronne and I make a model *ménage*. We have lived since our marriage-day in unity and concord. To obviate *ennui*, we now and then seek a little variety, each in his own sphere. She is *dévote*, goes to church, rates the servants, retires to rest at nine o'clock, and rises at five. I am not devout, and I do not go to church, except on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday, for example's sake."

"O baron, how naughty!" said Madame O'Neil with playful reproach.

"What will you, madame? I am a good Christian; but I am devoid of superstition. Doubtless it is a good custom to go to church—for women. As to men"— And here an expressive shrug completed the sentence. "In fine, I do, as I say, go to church twice a year. One owes that much to one's self, one's family, to society. My hours also are different from the baronne's,—a good deal later. I have my friends; she hers. Occasionally they happen to be the same. Towards one another," concluded the baron with a flourish, and in an emotional tone, "our mutual conduct has been, I am proud to say it, without reproach."

A speech which was received with gentle applause.

"But to return to the *soirée*," suggested O'Neil, so soon as the baron had recovered his breath. "Baron, you will not leave me in the lurch?"

"To the *soirée*; ah, yes!" And he deliberately walked to the door and opened it. "We will think what is to be done. The baronne must be consulted. As I have said, that is her province. However, I will do what I can. Adieu, my friends; or, rather, *au revoir*. It is never 'good-by' in Nice. Madame, I have the honor to salute you." And, with a low bow, the baron was gone.

"A small affair, only fifteen people, tea, cakes!" O'Neil was shouting after him down the stairs. But in vain: he either did not or would not hear; and mother and

son looked at each other and laughed, and, though almost, were not quite sure whether they had gained their point or not.



CHAPTER III.

BUT it soon appeared that they had. The baron's promises, though vague, were, after all, to be better trusted in than many more definite ones. Within a week, Col. Mildmay was sitting alone one evening in the big drawing-room of the villa, listlessly cutting the pages of some magazine lately arrived from England, looking pale and grave and sad, and impatiently listening for the sound of his daughter's footsteps. She was in her room dressing,—dressing for her first foreign party, to which, three days ago, an invitation had reached her in the prim, minute handwriting of Madame de Nérac. The colonel had not very long to wait. The hour mentioned was an early one. Presently the footsteps were heard,—light, swift steps,—bringing her quickly to him; and then the door was opened, and she was standing before him, a pleasant vision of a fair Saxon girl, dressed in a pale, gleaming silk, and with soft flowers in her wavy, bright hair.

"Do I look nice, papa? do you like me?" Ethel inquired, coming up to his easy-chair, and making him a low, playful courtesy.

Her father smiled. He was her father, and he doated upon her; but even an impartial judgment could not help being a favorable one. And so he replied, after a careful, critical survey, "Yes: you do look nice, Ethel,—very nice. That pale, uncertain pink becomes you exactly, and so do the roses in your hair. Of course, I like you, darling."

Ethel loved compliments; and, to do her justice, she loved her father's compliments better than those of most other people. His genuine, hearty admiration made her flush and sparkle with pleasure. "It is a pretty dress," she said, stroking the rich, soft silk complacently, and glancing at her reflection in the opposite mirror. "I am so glad I decided on the shade! Madame Pauline was right, you see, papa. She said it was the right shade for me."

"Those Parisian dressmakers are witches, I think," said the colonel, laughing. Then he looked at his daughter again. "I hope that you are not overdressed, dear," he said

a little uneasily. "I thought the baron said that it was quite a small party."

"Yes, that is true; but—but is it not a pity not to wear the dress even once? Most likely it will be my sole opportunity," replied Ethel in a somewhat melancholy tone.

"What a desponding view!" laughed her father. "But it doesn't signify. Even if you are a little too grand for the occasion, the men will admire, the women will envy you. At all events, your dress is in perfect taste: there can be no second opinion about that."

"I suppose I had better think of going," said Ethel, buttoning her gloves, and looking at the clock. "It is past the hour already. Papa, I wish—oh, how I do wish that you were coming too!"

"What, love! do you feel shy? I did not think you knew what the sensation was."

"No, not shy exactly. What is there to be shy about? But I feel a little lonely."

"So do I; or, rather, so shall I when you are gone."

Ethel kissed him affectionately; but, truth to tell, she was more occupied by her own sensations than by his.

"Upon my word, now that I think of it, I believe it is a little shy that I feel," she said, laughing. "Madame de Nérac seems to consider my going alone such a wonderful business. She wrote four pages on the subject. And the baron, too,—do you remember?—made as many promises and asseverations about the care which would be taken of me, as though it were a journey to Australia that was proposed, instead of a mild little tea-party half a mile away. Such ridiculous nonsense! They evidently don't consider me a young lady to be trusted,—very different from you, papa, who would trust me, I know, to the end of the world."

"And back again. Of course I would, love. Why not? You have never deceived me, nor caused me a moment's pain, in your life."

A commendation which thrilled Edith through with a very different and sweeter satisfaction than even his compliments had produced a few minutes ago. But she was too proud to betray all, or indeed any thing, of what she felt. "You stupid old papa!" she said, laughing. "You have got a goose for a daughter, and you think her a swan; but so much the better. Even one's father's good opinion is better than nobody's."

A piece of sauciness to which there was no time to reply. The carriage was announced for the third time (it having been

waiting at least half an hour); and Miss Mildmay's prim English maid, who, in deference to Madame de Nérac's feelings of propriety, was to assist the tall British footman in the task of protecting her during her drive, appeared at the door to remind her that it was nine o'clock.

"Oh, my goodness! And I was invited for eight, and told to come early on purpose," Ethel cried in great dismay. "Good-night, papa! Good-night!" And she was really gone at last.

True enough, she was a little late. The diminutive antechamber was crowded with hats and coats and cloaks,—sufficiently clear tokens that most of the company had arrived. Ethel fancied that the smart *bonne*, with the rose-colored ribbons in her coquettish cap, who was assisting her own Hannah in divesting her of her wraps, looked astonished and curious, as though something unexpected and odd were occurring. Sounds of music were coming from the drawing-room; and when the door was thrown open, and she found herself standing upon the threshold, in full view of a well-filled room, every eye in which, she was distinctly conscious, was fixed either upon herself or her pink silk gown, then, indeed, for a brief but most terrible moment, she felt altogether overcome. It was a short moment, but one in which there yet was time for two or three clear sensations. One of them was—one in which all women will sympathize—a sudden, swift, and profound conviction that she was absurdly overdressed. Not that she was so quickly able to take in the details of the toilets around her (that, of course, had to be deferred till later on); but a general impression of sober colors and covered necks reached her, adding not a little to her dismay and confusion.

But every thing comes to an end: that moment came to an end, thank goodness! The music, which had paused at her entry, went on again. The baron, who was singing—or rather grimacing; for his voice had taken leave of him long ago—a comic song, could not of course come to her rescue; but Madame de Nérac, a wiry, tart-looking old dame, made a fussy little rush to meet her, whispering vociferations which Ethel could only half comprehend, but which conveyed to her a vague impression that she had been the cause of frightful anxiety to everybody, and that they had quite given her up, and also, alas! though this was not expressed, except by the baronne's peering little eyes, that the abominable pink silk dress was the subject of much amazement, a little amusement, and close examination,

such as a Frenchwoman's single glance can accomplish.

Indeed, poor Ethel winced beneath that comprehensive glance, one which seemed to take in the smallest detail, such as whether her gloves had one button or two buttons or three, as well as whether her silk was worth ten francs or twenty or thirty the yard. And all the time the baronne was chattering away under her breath. At last she paused. "Mademoiselle would like a seat, of course. What part of the room would she choose?"

"Oh! anywhere," Ethel said a little desperately.

"But of course mademoiselle would join the *jeunes filles*," proceeded madame without heeding her. "Of course, of course!"

And, before she knew where she was, our heroine found herself in front of a group of white muslin figures, who were all rising and courtesying, and to whom she supposed that she was making some sort of a courtesy too. Then one of the muslin damsels presented her with a chair; the baronne hissed six or seven names in rapid succession in her ears, and hustled away; and Ethel with a sigh, which was more like a groan, sat down at last.

Of course, all this took only a minute or two to happen. The comic song was still proceeding; and, when it was over, the kind old baron came to her with one of his gallant speeches, and a look in his eyes as though, in his opinion, whether she was overdressed or not, she was looking remarkably well.

But, somehow, the group of *jeunes filles* seemed to be a sacred group,—a sort of vestal virgin affair. Even the white-haired baron did not long profane it by his proximity; and not another man (of whom, by the way, there was a decided numerical inferiority in the room) so much as came near it. The men clustered together; the young girls clustered together; and the married ladies sat, for the most part, with their backs to the wall. Here and there an odd man intruded himself into their ranks; but glances alone, and very few even of them, reached *ces demoiselles*.

Ethel thought it odd and rather dull. It was her first French party; and her hosts belonged to the old *régime*, into which none of the modern innovations of fashion had yet penetrated.

The fashion of flirting, for instance,—at least so far as the young ladies were concerned,—seemed utterly unknown to these regions. One or two sprightly-looking dames, who, to judge from their more elaborate style of dress, were married, were, she

fancied, mildly practising the rudiments of the art; but the lamps of the virgins burnt away in placid, if somewhat dull serenity, undisturbed by the faintest breath of a masculine temptation.

Having thus come to some swift and rather desponding general conclusions, Miss Mildmay began to survey immediate objects. It was evident that her single chance of amusement depended upon the *jeunes filles*; and accordingly to them she turned, with it must be confessed, a little sinking at her heart. For the matter of that, in their narrow, skimpy muslin skirts, their colored sashes, and their plainly-dressed hair, they looked like school-girls, and nothing more. School-girls! Not a bit of it. Ethel was quite mistaken. They were young ladies on their promotion, just like herself; some of them a little younger, most of them a little older, than she was. All were of an age to be married, and were probably perfectly well aware that husbands existed for them at this very moment in the mind's eye of their parents. But for the present they were young girls, and as young girls comported themselves, clinging together, twittering together, giggling together, modestly veiling their merry bright eyes, dressing in gowns worth a few francs apiece, and dreaming of the *luxe* and freedom which marriage was to purchase for them.

Ethel, turning round upon them suddenly, found that these same bright eyes were, for the moment, intent upon her. Her unfortunate pink silk dress again — how she wished it were at the bottom of the sea! She felt as though she were a sort of foolish bird-of-paradise straying about in a hen-yard.

But it was necessary to think of conversation. The *demoiselles*, as in duty bound, began. "Mademoiselle was English. Mademoiselle was a stranger in Nice. It was hoped that mademoiselle enjoyed the beautiful climate, and found that it suited her health," — observations to which they gave expression, with some others equally interesting and appropriate, and to which Ethel vouchsafed monosyllabic replies. In fact, conversation did not flow just at first; but, luckily, a fillip was given to it by the fact of a chance announcement of Ethel's, that she was fond of walking, and had already taken several long walks; "though," she added, "I do not always venture as far as I should like, as I generally am alone."

"Alone!" And all the black eyes opened wide, and the word was repeated in various tones of horrified amazement.

"Yes, alone of course," said Miss Mildmay, bridling up. "Why not? What is to

happen to one? At all events, it is unavoidable, since papa is not able to walk, and I detest the company of a maid, and — and I have nobody else to come with me," she concluded a little defiantly.

The young ladies exchanged demure smiles, and murmured something about "Wonderful courage! Surprising enterprise!" &c.

"But why?" demanded Ethel a little sharply. "I did not know that the neighborhood of Nice was infested by brigands or murderers or wild beasts; is it?"

"Oh, no! of course not." And the group giggled frantically.

"But with us it is not the custom, you see. In France, we do not think of going out alone, — even across the street. It would be thought odd. It would occasion remark. In fact, such a wild proceeding was never heard of or thought of."

"Well, I hope that it is not rude to say it; but, in that case, I am glad I am not a French girl," said Ethel bluntly.

"I go out alone; that is, I go to church two streets off alone," here interposed an unexpected ally, whose lively brown eyes had been silently observing the stranger. "People make remarks, I believe; but, for my part, I consider our French notions absurd and exaggerated. At all events, when one has ceased to be in one's first youth, a little liberty is allowable," she concluded with a little decisive nod.

She was a short, clever-looking girl, with a pleasant face; and, though she too wore a white muslin gown, it was relieved by trimmings and ornaments, which betrayed aspirations beyond the unadorned simplicity of her companions.

"One's first youth!" Ethel repeated with a smile. "You do not look so very old, mademoiselle."

"Do I not? I feel it then. I am six and twenty."

"But that is not old."

"In France it is considered so for those who are unmarried, — in fact, nearly an old maid."

And she smiled and laughed, — a little dryly and a little sadly. Ethel felt interested. Her new acquaintance's name was, she presently discovered, Christine Deneuve; and in Christine there was, she fancied, something more than the inanity and tiresome prudery of the other girls. In five minutes they had fraternized; in ten they had become familiar, and had discovered several mutual points of sympathy.

Suddenly Ethel became conscious of a sort of flutter, which all at once seemed to pervade the knot of *jeunes filles*; and Chris-

tine, who was shortsighted, put up her eyeglass in quite a little flurry.

"Ah! the Countess O'Neil and her son," she observed. "What wind brings them here, I wonder?" And she spoke with un-wanted eagerness.

"O'Neil!" repeated Ethel, marvelling at the subdued twitter of excitement which the new arrivals had produced. "Well, I am glad that I am not quite the last, at all events. O'Neil! Who is he? Who are they?"

"You do not know? Yet they are half-compatriots of yours. Count O'Neil is, as you may perceive, a handsome young man. I take an interest in him because I know a namesake of his,—probably a relation,—for whose sake I will always feel interested in any one who bears the name. Of this young man I don't know much. They are new-comers here. They say that he is rich,—immensely rich,—the *parti* of the season, in fact. All the mothers are tearing each other's eyes out about him."

"And the daughters?"

"Of course, they know nothing. At least, that is understood. On such subjects they are supposed to be kept in the dark."

"A darkness in which, however, they see remarkably well," Ethel thought, perceiving how busily all the lively black eyes were following the young count's movements.

Christine saw her smile. "What will you?" she said. "After all, we are not blind nor deaf. Since we cannot pursue the young men as it is said you do in England, at least we may look at them; may we not?"

"And is he so very rich, then?" Ethel, not caring to notice this little thrust, inquired with apparently a grand indifference.

"Very,—at least he will be one day. For the present, he is poor; and his mother wishes him to marry," added Christine confidentially.

"Indeed! Poor little fellow! So the mothers manage the sons as well as the daughters in"— But there was no time to finish the sentence. The flutter which has been already mentioned, and which, up to this, had been of a subdued and gentle character, suddenly seemed to reach a climax. The *jeunes filles* colored and fidgeted, and smiled and sparkled. Count O'Neil was actually approaching them, making his way in a certain unusual, determined fashion, straight towards the little group. He had reached it now, and was bowing before it with a delightful, easy comprehensiveness and grace, with, indeed,

a pleasant sort of condescension and self-possession, which betrayed that he felt pretty sure of his welcome. The young ladies were bowing, too,—not condescendingly, however, but glad, eager, excited little bows, accompanied by modest glances of pleasure, but alas, alas! glances which were utterly and entirely wasted. Count O'Neil never so much as saw them. His glances were directed towards one object alone, and he had eyes for no other. His general salutations resolved themselves at last into a very particular and marked one; and, perhaps, even Christine Delneuve experienced a momentary pang when she perceived that her new friend was the magnet of attraction. Five minutes ago the English girl had been wondered at, criticised, tolerated. Now, if the secret of those virginal hearts had been laid bare, it would have been discovered that she was suddenly detested. Count O'Neil had placed himself before her chair, and had eyes and ears for her alone.

"Ah! so you *do* know him," Christine observed in a whisper: "why did you make me so many questions, then?"

"Yes, I know Count O'Neil a little; but I hardly thought that he would have remembered me," Ethel replied, speaking to Christine, but at O'Neil, and giving the young man one of her most radiant and captivating smiles.

"Not have remembered you!" And the words were said in a tone which produced a general sinking of heart and a keen feeling of irritation all around.

No doubt about it, the *jeunes filles* were badly treated; and, to increase their aggravation, Count O'Neil and Ethel, after the first few words, took refuge in the English tongue, and were incomprehensible. It was adding insult to injury. What the young ladies saw was, however, more than enough for them, poor things!

Presently Miss Mildmay rose; and the young man presented her with his arm, and led her in, as it were; a triumphal manner, her beautiful dress trailing yards behind her, across the room, to the spot where the Comtesse O'Neil was seated. All the company—mothers, daughters, fathers, sons—were now, indeed, staring in right earnest. Yet it was a simple business enough; though, apparently, they thought it significant in the extreme.

"Is she, then, a *fiancée* already?" demanded one stout, belligerent-looking matron of her neighbor. "Truly, such *sang froid* and boldness are marvellous!"

"It is the manner in which these English are brought up," replied her friend

tartly ; "I have often heard that they had no self-respect or propriety of manner. And even if it were only manner"—

And she sniffed the air with her sharp, thin nose.

"That girl cannot be young, though, she concluded malevolently,—“approaching her thirty years, I should say. What do you think, madame ?”

But madame's reply is unimportant ; for, by this time, Ethel, happily quite unconscious of these and the many other criticisms to which she was being subjected, had been presented to Madame O'Neil, and was seated by her side, with Count O'Neil in a *pose* of devotion, and with admiration beaming from his handsome blue eyes, before her.

CHAPTER IV.

SUCH a handsome woman as she is, *S'papa !*" Ethel said, describing Madame O'Neil to her father, as they were, next morning, seated over their late breakfast. "And so young-looking, too ! If it were not for her son, one could not believe that she was more than thirty or thirty-five years old."

"And what of this same son ?" inquired the colonel at this point. "Was he at the party too ?"

"Oh, yes, of course ! What about him ? Well"—And she paused, smiling thoughtfully, yet merrily.

Her father saw the smile. "Yes : what about him ?" he said a little quickly and anxiously. "Do you like him ? and—does he like you ?"

"How do I know ? Well, I think he does, *rather*," said Ethel with demure frankness.

"Does he, indeed ? He is quite a foreign-looking fellow," he said a little contemptuously.

But, though the remark was meant to provoke a reply, it was met by silence. Ethel was in a thoughtful, not a talkative, mood this morning.

"Perhaps Madame O'Neil will expect us to call upon her," she observed presently. "You know, papa, that it is the foreign custom for new-comers to call first."

But Col. Mildmay declined the proposal. "I have no desire to rush into doubtful acquaintanceships," he said with British nervousness.

"She is a countess, papa."

"Pooh, pooh ! These foreign titles are

worth nothing, — worse than nothing frequently. However, O'Neil is a good name ; and, if they have any thing to say to the O'Neils of Mount Druid, I shall be glad to know them. I will ask the baron about them, or, better still, I'll write to my old friend Mrs. O'Neil on the chance of finding her alive still. But is it worth while, I wonder ?" he added, half aloud, and with a short, sad sigh.

Ethel heard the words and the sigh ; but, absorbed in her own reflections, she failed to read their meaning.

"Count O'Neil's father was Irish, and he is to be very rich some day, and there is a title in the family ; at least, I think that I heard something of the sort," she added a little confusedly, perceiving that a grave smile was crossing her father's lips.

"In that case, it is the same family," he said. "I knew them very well once, years and years ago. I will tell you a secret, Ethel, if you like. Five and twenty years ago, before I married your poor mother, I wanted to marry Nora O'Neil. Her brother Bernard was a school-fellow of mine ; and I met her at his place in Ireland,—Mount Druid. Well, I fell in love with Nora ; but she liked somebody else, and would not look at me. Poor Nora ! I believe the fellow whom she cared for, and married in opposition to her mother and brother's wishes, killed her, at last, by slow tortures of unkindness. She is dead these many years."

"Papa !" And Ethel could say no more. These reminiscences of bygone times, these memories of wasted and lost affections, sounded strangely and sadly in her ears. Her father was speaking calmly, coldly even, of what once had been a cruel and painful grief ; but now it was dead and gone. It had become a pale, harmless ghost of the past. She was young and ardent ; and the composed, passionless way in which he alluded to the lost love of his youth smote discordantly upon her heart. She could not understand it. She hoped never to be able to understand it. It startled and dismayed her, and filled her with a sort of sorrowful indignation.

"The family consisted, in those days, of two sons and two daughters and their mother,—the most charming woman I ever met," went on Col. Mildmay musingly. "They are all dead now except Arthur, the youngest, who was quite a lad when I knew them. Mrs. O'Neil is, I believe and hope, alive still ; but I have not heard any thing of her for a long, long time. I really think that I will write to Mount Druid on the chance. I should like to hear something of the dear old lady again."

Next day, Miss Mildmay was inclined to rejoice that she had not tried to induce her father to make the first advance towards the O'Neil acquaintanceship. It is just as pleasant to be sought as to seek; and, the following afternoon, Madame O'Neil and her son appeared at the villa, accompanied by the inevitable baron as master of the ceremonies.

"Madame la Comtesse," he explained, "being well acquainted with English customs, had permitted herself the pleasure of calling first. She was most desirous of making the colonel's acquaintance, and, having the felicity of already knowing his charming and interesting daughter"— And a suitable flourish of compliments completed the presentation.

In five minutes, Col. Mildmay had elicited the information he wished for.

It was a fact. Madame la Comtesse was certainly Bernard O'Neil's widow. "Was it indeed possible that Col. Mildmay was an old friend,—a schoolfellow? How delightful! What a touching coincidence!" And Madame O'Neil's black eyes beamed softly.

Had she heard from her mother-in-law lately? "No: she had not. The poor old lady had of late years become"— And here she tapped her forehead significantly. "Not surprising, considering her age," Madame O'Neil continued, with a little sigh. "She was not in Ireland now. She and her second son were travelling for health-sake; change of air and scene having been recommended by the doctors. She was not quite sure of their whereabouts just at present. In the south of Spain perhaps, or in Sicily."

And here Madame O'Neil's information came to a conclusion, and she seemed to have no more to say on the subject.

But this was quite enough to dissipate the colonel's defiance, and to throw his usual reserve into something like real regret, when his visitor presently rose rather abruptly, having suddenly remembered an appointment at four o'clock, which must be kept. But she was not gone yet. As in a lady's letter, the pith seemed to be contained in the postscript. Perhaps it was her son's appealing glance which served as a reminder; or perhaps she considered it more diplomatic to keep it in reserve to the last: at all events, out it came now.

"By the way," she said, holding Ethel's hand as she bade her farewell, and looking kindly into the young girl's bright face,— "by the way, I have a request to make, which, I trust, you will not refuse, colonel. The Duchesse de Saint-Hilaire is, as I dare

say you have heard, giving a grand *fête* on Monday evening. It is to be the ball of the season. All the world is longing to go. It is a pity that mademoiselle should not see a something of our Nice gayeties; and, if you will trust her to my chaperonage, I shall be delighted to bring her."

"O papa! But I am not asked!" exclaimed Ethel with mingled delight and despair.

"Pardon me: indeed you are. Madame de Saint-Hilaire, knowing that I have no daughter of my own, has kindly begged me to bring the prettiest young girl of my acquaintance. So you see you are invited, mademoiselle."

"O papa!" cried Ethel again, confused yet enchanted; and her father laughed, and said,—

"Come, come, madame! the child is silly enough as it is. She is capable of taking your French compliments seriously."

"But they are meant seriously," every one assured him all round,—the baron, and Madame O'Neil, and her son.

And, though Col. Mildmay hesitated and demurred a little for form's sake, it was not difficult to guess that he had already consented. Indeed, it would have been difficult, nay, downright impossible, to resist Ethel's pleading, rapturous face.

"What will you wear?" she was amazed at hearing young O'Neil's voice anxiously inquiring, when the colonel had pronounced the final "yes." "What is your color?—the one which suits you best?" Ethel could not conceal her amusement. But O'Neil was quite serious and unconscious. To the French male mind, a woman's dress is of equal importance as it is to herself; in some cases, perhaps, even as herself,—no detail or trifle is too insignificant to be discussed. "Wear!" she repeated: "I don't know, I am sure. I must get a ball-dress, I suppose."

"Ah! then your milliner will advise you. White, I should say. A young girl never looks so well as in white. White tulle, trimmed with snowdrops. Ah, that would be adorable!"

"Would it, indeed?" with a slightly scornful laugh. "Well, then, it shall be white and snowdrops," she added, demurely satirical.

"A thousand thanks! You will look charming, delightful! Your *début* will be a sensation. Delisle, in the Rue St. Vincent de Paul, is the best florist. His flowers seem almost to smell. All the fashionables go there when they have not time to send to Paris."

And then, at last, his mother having al-

ready left the room, Count O'Neil was compelled to tear himself away.

Miss Mildmay's scorn and satire notwithstanding, the young man's wishes seemed to merit some attention, as, indeed, they deserved to do. When Monday evening came, and Ethel emerged from the mysteries of the toilet, radiant in white tulle and innocent-looking snowdrops, her father thought, though (becoming charier of his compliments in proportion as they seemed likely to increase from other quarters) he did not say, that probably she would be one of the prettiest girls at Madame de Saint-Hilaire's ball. Nor did his anticipation turn out false. The English girl, white tulle, snowdrops, and all, did decidedly produce—as it had been prophesied to her that she would—a sensation. Perhaps it was because she was a novelty; perhaps because rumors of high birth and a large fortune were in circulation connected with her name; perhaps because she really was pretty at least, if not beautiful, fresh, and beaming, and embellished by the spirit of thorough and simple enjoyment, which is a rare element in ball-rooms; or perhaps it was on account of all these causes combined: but, whatever the cause was, Ethel did enjoy what O'Neil, as he triumphantly carried her away for the third time from a host of aspiring partners, told her was a *succès fou*.

"All the men are inquiring who you are," he assured her in eager tones.

"Nonsense!" Ethel said a little breathlessly (for they were waltzing), but thinking it very agreeable nonsense all the while.

"It is a fact; on my honor it is! If you only heard what the Duc de Saint-Hilaire said about you! I will spare your blushes, and not repeat; but this I may tell you, that poor Madame D'Erfort is green with jealousy."

"Madame D'Erfort! Who is she?" Ethel inquired, opening her eyes.

"You don't know? She is *almost* the handsomest woman in the room; and the duke is her—ahem—admires her excessively. He is a *connoisseur* on such matters. Hush! This is Madame D'Erfort passing by now."

"She is charming!" Ethel said warmly, as Madame D'Erfort, one of the well-known beauties of the season, swept by, casting over her white shoulder a glance of mingled curiosity and irritation at the English girl, who was already beginning to cause her qualms of uneasiness. "Charming! And what a lovely dress!" added Ethel a little despondingly.

"So it ought to be. It cost fifteen hun-

dred francs, and has only just arrived from Paris. Madame Mirecourt, the empress's *modiste*, dresses her. By the way, did you see the look with which she favored you, Miss Mildmay? It is the best compliment you have received this evening. She detests you already."

"Detests me! Why? What in the world have I done to her?"

"A great deal. Saint-Hilaire admires you. Quite enough, I can tell you," said O'Neil, laughing.

"But is not Madame D'Erfort married? Is she a widow?" inquired Ethel innocently.

"A widow! Not at all. She has a husband; indeed, so far as that goes, she has two, some people say. I can certify to the existence of one, at all events."

"But"—and Ethel looked half-shocked, half-puzzled. "Ah! you are jesting," she said then, perceiving that her companion was laughing still.

"Jesting! I never was more serious in my life. But will you not have another turn?" And the next instant Ethel's perplexity was driven out of her head by finding herself in the midst of the maze of dancers.

"What are your engagements?" O'Neil inquired when they paused again. "You will give me another dance; will you not?"

"Another! But this is already the third, Count O'Neil. Look at my card;" and she showed him the long list of names,—one, sometimes even two, before every dance."

"There only remains the cotillon, then. Of course that"—

"Oh, the cotillon! I have promised to dance that with M. de Saint-Hilaire."

O'Neil's countenance fell in a ludicrous fashion.

"Oh, no! Impossible!" he exclaimed.

Ethel was almost at her wits'-ends by this time. "Why is it impossible?" she inquired breathlessly.

"Because—I was sure that you would dance the cotillon with me. I took it as a matter of course," he said reproachfully.

Ethel nearly laughed in his face; and, indeed, it was hard enough to remain serious, the young man's confidence had been so genuine, his disappointment was so openly and simply expressed. He was and looked to be such a thorough *bon enfant*, and he was evidently so aggrieved and hurt by her unconscious unkindness, that, in spite of her gayety, she felt quite sorry and remorseful.

"It is very provoking; but"—she began.

"And there is another reason too," interrupted O'Neil excitedly. "Excuse me for saying it, but you must not be made the dupe of one of Saint-Hilaire's caprices. He has had some silly, passing quarrel with Madame d'Erfort, and, to annoy her, has noticed you."

"Noticed me!"

But O'Neil was talking too eagerly and volubly to be even conscious of the interruption. "He is not tired of Madame d'Erfort yet," he went on; "and to-morrow he will be as thick as ever with her, and will have forgotten you. But, if you dance the cotillon with him to-night, she will not forget or forgive you in a hurry; and she is not a safe woman to offend, Miss Mildmay"—

"I am not afraid of her, I am sure," Ethel interposed, looking flushed and dignified.

"But will you not take a friend's advice,—a true friend, one who knows? Ask my mother if you wish: she will tell you just the same. Saint-Hilaire is a low fellow, without respect or esteem for women. He is not hampered with scruples, and would blast a young girl's name as readily as he would a married woman's. He and Madame d'Erfort may do as they like, but you"—

"My goodness! Pray stop,"—exclaimed Ethel, half frightened, half amused, by this earnest adjuration. "What a fuss about nothing, about a dance! I tell you, Count O'Neil, I do not care a straw for Madame d'Erfort or for M. Saint-Hilaire, either: they can't hurt me, I assure you, no matter what they say or do."

"But the world will talk. Saint-Hilaire will boast of his conquest. You know all the women do fall in love with him," he added in a melancholy tone. "It has come to this, that actually his notice makes celebrities. And to-night, above all, in his mother's house. Miss Mildmay"—

"Well, Count O'Neil!"

"If you will not listen to me, at least!"

"But I am listening to you; am I not?" and Ethel smiled right into the young man's eloquent, beseeching eyes.

"Well then, will you; will you not? Ah, yes! you *will* get out of your engagement to Saint-Hilaire," O'Neil cried delightedly.

"Give up my partner! But then who am I to dance with?"

"With me, of course. I have been looking forward to it for weeks,—for days I mean," as Ethel shook her head and laughed.

The young girl pretended to hesitate. "With you, Count O'Neil? But"—

"But. Why should there be any 'but'? Do not, you cannot, be so cruel as to refuse."

"Well," said Ethel, "supposing I do, not because I am the least afraid of Madame d'Erfort, you understand, but just to oblige you, since you are foolish enough to care,—how is it to be done? What excuse can I make to M. de Saint-Hilaire? You must take it all upon yourself, Count O'Neil, and get me out of the difficulty."

The young man looked profoundly thoughtful. After all, it was a serious business, and not to be so lightly despatched as Ethel seemed to think.

"It will come better from yourself," he said at last. "If I were to interfere openly, Saint-Hilaire might consider it an affront. The consequences might be terrible. Heaven only knows what would be the result."

"A duel perhaps. Are you afraid?" and Ethel's dark eyes opened wide.

"Afraid!" And the fiery young man colored angrily,—so angrily that she felt quite ashamed of her unworthy little taunt.

"Come, you know that I am only jesting," she said soothingly. "But I hate fudging; and we have been fudging over this silly business for this last half-hour. I will settle it somehow with M. de Saint-Hilaire, to oblige you," she concluded with a gracious little nod, which magically appeased O'Neil.

"I would gladly fight a hundred duels for your sake," he whispered in her ear,—an observation to which Ethel found it more convenient to feign deafness than to reply.

However, she kept her word, and threw over the duke,—an act which not a single other woman in the room would have perpetrated. History does not record what means she adopted to gain her end; but, at all events, they were successful, for Saint-Hilaire, though much astonished, was not offended. Perhaps he had already repented of his temporary infidelity to Madame d'Erfort, and was not sorry to be free to return to his allegiance to her; or perhaps he considered that English eccentricity explained every thing. The former hypothesis is most probable, since Madame d'Erfort occupied the place of honor as his partner in the cotillon which Ethel had vacated; and she,—of course, she danced it with O'Neil.

The young man was elated and delighted and grateful,—touchingly, enthusiastically grateful; and his mother, who was a clever woman, and who was with interest watching the threads of the game which

her son was playing, thought it looked a promising little game of which the beginnings at least were most auspicious.

CHAPTER V.

NEXT day, as Ethel and her father were sitting in the sun, and listening to the baron's gossip, and to the band which was playing in the public gardens, Christine Delneuve, passing by with her mother, joined the little group.

"And so you are *lancée*," she said, addressing Ethel in her usual abrupt fashion. "The impatient bird has escaped from its cage. I heard of you last night at the Saint-Hilaire's."

"Did you? I was looking out for you."

"A useless labor. That is not our *monde*. But a gay young cousin of mine was there, and told me of your success. Receive my congratulations, mademoiselle," Christine said gayly.

"Not your *monde*? What do you mean by that?" Ethel laughed with a blush, and a laugh at the compliment.

"*Mon Dieu!* I mean what I say. We are neither lively enough nor rich enough for it. Madame de Saint-Hilaire is utterly unconscious of the existence even of such slow folk as we."

"Slow! but is she fast, then?" Ethel inquired a little uneasily.

"Heavens! don't look so solemn. Everybody is fast at Nice, more or less,—everybody, that is, who is anybody. But may I not present you to my mother, mademoiselle?"

Madame Delneuve was a gentle, quiet woman, with an anxious, patient face, which now smiled kindly upon Ethel. "You have been filling Christine's head ever since she met you the other night," she told her.

"Have I? And I, too, have thought of her, madame."

"Charitably, or uncharitably, which?" Christine inquired, laughing. "But you have not yet made up your mind on the subject,—confess, mademoiselle, that is it. By the way, how is our friend the handsome count?"

In vain Ethel tried to look unconscious. "I mean Count O'Neil, of course," Christine galloped on. "His mother chaperoned you last night; did she not?"

"You know every thing apparently," Ethel observed.

"To be sure. We are in a nest of gossip,

and there is no such thing as a secret at Nice. Well, you could not have a better chaperon than Madame la Comtesse; for for her son's sake, if not for her own, she has the *entrée* to all the fashionable salons."

Ethel could not resist a thrust. "So you French girls *do* know a thing or two, after all," she said a little maliciously.

Christine laughed, and shrugged her shoulders; and her mother sighed. "Don't mind Christine, mademoiselle," she said: "she is not half so wise as she pretends, nor does she always mean what she says. She is a spoilt child."

"Of yours, mother, if not of fortune's," Christine put in with a sudden softness of voice and manner. Then she turned to Ethel, "You mean that I am not so innocent or so ingenuous as *ces demoiselles*. But you see there is a difference: I am twenty-six, and a person of experience,—of great experience," she repeated with a short and not quite comfortable little laugh.

"Of great experience!" said her mother with a smile, and gently stroking her daughter's head. "Poor little girl!" she added with a sort of sad, tender pleasantry.

Ethel looked curiously at the pair. Around them was a busy hum of conversation. The band was playing a noisy military march. Within a yard, the old baron was revelling over some tid-bit of scandal; and Col. Mildmay was listening with languid indifference. Across the road, the blue, limpid waters were making a music of their own. But, in the midst of all this pleasant brightness and gayety, a shadow seemed suddenly to have crept over the two Frenchwomen, and, for a minute or two, they were thoughtful and silent.

But only for a minute. Just as Ethel was wondering what the cause of it could be, Christine's face brightened; and, with true French lightness of heart, she was herself again, and rattling away as volubly as before. "Come," she said, "it is too fine a day for any thing but pleasant *souvenirs*. Though I look strong," she explained in an off-hand way to Ethel, "I have been very ill, and am only now getting to be quite myself again; and illness, as you know, leaves traces behind, and is apt to affect one's spirits. What were we talking about? Ah! your gayeties. You do not know what is before you: in a week you will be swallowed up in a vortex. It is I who tell you so. Now that you know Madame de Saint-Hilaire, and that the Comtesse O'Neil has adopted you"—

"But she has not adopted me."

"We shall see; we shall see. By the way, I may as well give you a piece of in-

formation. It is doubtful, to say the least of it, that the count is the great heir which the Nice world chooses to take for granted that he is. There are two sides to the story, and another claimant to the property. There I be grateful for the warning," she added with a laugh.

"I do not acknowledge any particular cause for gratitude," Ethel replied sharply. "It is a matter of perfect indifference to me."

Col. Mildmay was rising at the moment, complaining of the heat of the sun. "Shall we get into the carriage, love?" he proposed to his daughter; and she was not sorry to assent.

Christine gave her a keen look as they shook hands. "I have offended you, I know I have," she said; "but how?"

"You have not offended me,—not in the least," Ethel protested. "Only don't suppose me to be quite so mercenary as you—you French people seem to be," she added, laughing.

"I deserve that," Christine acknowledged; "and I beg your pardon. Prove that you have granted it by promising to come to see us; that is to say, if you have time, and can remember in the midst of all your gayeties."

"Of course I shall have time; of course I shall remember," Ethel protested; and Christine thanked her with a little incredulous smile, which made her the more determined to keep her promise.

Part, at least, of Mademoiselle Delneuve's prediction turned out to be correct: Madame de Saint-Hilaire's ball was, in fact, for Ethel, the signal of quite a steeple-chase of amusements and pleasures. It was the carnival; and, as everybody knows, the carnival in Nice is only another name for a sort of temporary insanity which seems to seize indiscriminately upon all—young and old, grave and gay—who have the strength and will to enjoy it. Day and night, the race goes on, with as little intermission of repose as nature absolutely requires; and the knowledge that the holiday is a short one, and that it is to be followed by the enforced, comparative quiet of Lent, enables most people to go through an amount of fatigue, of which, were the season a longer one, they would be quite incapable. Ethel was young, and, moreover, she was strong: at all events, she was indefatigable; and night after night, and day after day, she dressed and danced and flirted, flitting, under Madame O'Neil's ever willing chaperonage, from one gay gathering to another, till she was fairly exhausted both in mind and body, and till her head was nearly, if not entirely, turned by the new *régime* of ad-

miration and flattery to which she was subjected.

It was all very pleasant and delightful. Any young girl would have enjoyed it as keenly as did Ethel, and be, as she was, a little intoxicated by the atmosphere into which she had been so suddenly transplanted. It was a great and abrupt change. For the last eighteen months, ever since she was supposed to be grown up, and to have escaped from governesses' hands, her father's health had been failing, and their life necessarily secluded and quiet. Her home had been a happy one, and of it she had been the petted darling and absolute queen; but it had been retired and monotonous. Of balls and parties she knew little or nothing; and her experience of gayety and of the world's pleasures had been confined to a few mild croquet-parties and afternoon teas.

And now they had come upon her with a rush. Suddenly she found herself courted, admired, flattered. All at once she made the wonderful discovery that she was pretty, attractive, fascinating,—at least that people found her so, and told her so too; for in foreign society compliments are more volubly and openly spoken than at home. Day after day, she listened to sweet speeches,—none the less sweet in her inexperienced ears because they were sometimes foolish and extravagant. Day after day, too, Count O'Neil's handsome eyes became more eloquent, and his manner more ardent. No wonder, then, that what between lover and admirers, and dancing and flirting, and late hours, and providing the necessary toilettes for the various occasions for which they were needed, Ethel had but little time to think about, or even to see, facts which were, nevertheless, clear as noonday.

To-day, for instance, she might have seen that her father was looking wretchedly pale and ill; and she might have observed that his invalid habits were becoming more and more confirmed; that he was weaker and more languid, and in lower spirits, than he had been a fortnight ago. The kind old baron was with him, paying his daily visit, which never failed now. The day was cold, though bright, and the colonel was afraid of venturing out; but Ethel was going for a walk, "to recover her roses," her father said, with a loving anxious look at her face, which two or three successive nights of dissipation had robbed of its color.

"They are but a little faded. The fresh air will make them bloom again more beautiful than ever," the baron, who never lost the opportunity of making a gallant speech, observed.

Ethel laughed gayly. She was young, and confident enough to feel no anxiety on the subject.

"I think that I will go to see Madame Delneuve and her daughter," she announced. "It is ten days or more since I promised to call upon them, and I have never gone yet. What a wretch I am, to be sure!"

"Poor little Christine!" said the baron good-naturedly. "Do go, mademoiselle, by all means, and brighten up those two poor women a little."

"Brighten them up? Do they require to be brightened up, baron? I am sure that Christine is unhappy!" she exclaimed, all at once remembering the little episode of the other day.

"Hum!" said the baron; "to be sure she is unhappy, since she is not married. But we will remedy that, never fear. I have got my eye on the *futur*. One husband does as well as another, in the admirable order of Providence and of young ladies' hearts, God be praised for it!" he concluded devoutly.

Ethel was nearly choking; but she was curious too.

"Has Mademoiselle Delneuve had a—disappointment, then?" she inquired eagerly.

"A disappointment! To be sure, since she is five and twenty, and still unmarried. But what know I of such matters? Do young ladies make confidences to old sinners like me, who believe in nothing,—not even in love? Come now, mademoiselle! Would you, under the circumstances, make a father confessor of me?" she inquired gayly.

Soon, we may be sure, Ethel had wormed it all out of him,—all that there was to extract. A commonplace little story enough,—a young girl, and a false and fickle lover, and blighted affections, and the old, old rigmarole of a story which is as ancient as the world itself.

"In England you do not think much of these trifles, I am aware," proceeded the baron with some sly malice. "The hearts of you British maidens are fabricated out of some strong, tough material, and can, without injurious consequences, stand several little shocks of the sort. With you, besides, public opinion tolerates such things, while with us it does not. In France, a *fiancée* who does not in due time become a *mariée*, is a marked girl. Men fight shy of her. Her mother finds her heavy on hands, —difficult to dispose of. Then misfortunes never come alone. Her father, who, *entre nous*, was a *mauvais sujet*, and a perpetual thorn in his wife's side, selected the moment

to die, leaving his affairs in disgraceful confusion. The poor creatures suffered much. Christine, *pour comble de malheur*, fell ill of what romantic people call a broken heart. Luckily, a friend or two remained. One of them, chancing to hear that the doctors considered change of scene and climate the girl's best chance, sent her and her mother to Nice last year, and was so pleased with the experiment that he repeated it this year. As you see, it has succeeded perfectly. The girl is as strong—as well as ever. Not only that. A remedy for the heart-disease has been found as well: at least, I hope it has. In these matters one must never be premature. One must be cautious and prudent. However, I may say," concluded the old gentleman with a reflective nod, "that I *hope* that I touch with my finger the right man at last."

Even Col. Mildmay laughed heartily.

Ethel, however, still looked scornful. "And so Mademoiselle Delneuve is allowing herself to be consoled," she observed shortly.

"Pooh, pooh! my dear young lady; and why should she not? Ah! you see with the eyes of eighteen; but wait till— But I must not reveal a young lady's age."

"I know Christine's age; and, when I am five or six and twenty myself, I will hold just the same opinion as I do now," Ethel asserted stoutly.

The baron shrugged his shoulders, and laughed,—a cynical laugh. "It all depends," he said. "If the first man you happen to fall in love with be the right man, well and good. Marry him by all means, and swear that one can love but once. But, if he is the wrong man, my dear young lady"—

But Ethel put her hands to her ears, and declared that she would not listen to him. "I will not argue the question with you," she said. "As you say yourself, you are a sceptic, and do not believe in love at all, whether it be for the right or the wrong person. *Au revoir*, baron! Good-by, papa! I am off!"

But the baron detained her. "I retract that sentiment, if I ever expressed it," he protested. "When I hear of all the hearts which your sweet eyes have wounded, Miss Ethel, I am forced into faith in spite of myself. Only this morning, a young man of my acquaintance"—

But Ethel, with a laugh and a conscious blush, had made her escape from the room; and the baron's gallant speech was interrupted midway.

He did not, we may be sure, complete it for the colonel's benefit; but, unfinished as it was, its meaning was clear enough.

"Who is this foolish young man to whom you allude, baron?" he inquired with assumed carelessness, after a moment's pause.

"*Mon Dieu!* there are shoals of them. Everybody admires your charming daughter, colonel."

The colonel looked delighted, but deprecating. "She is a pretty little thing; though nothing so wonderful, after all, baron. Is she so much admired really?" he inquired with a proud smile.

"Indeed, yes. I wish you could accompany her at least once into society, and see for yourself."

"Impossible, quite impossible!" said the colonel with a short sigh. "I should not be able—I am not able for any thing."

"No, of course not,—not yet; but you soon will be," said his kind old friend consolingly. "Don't lose heart, colonel! Meanwhile you have the best chaperon in the world for mademoiselle. Madame O'Neil is a thorough woman of the world, a charming person."

"Yes; but—I do not like to give her the trouble of"—

"Bah! my dear fellow. It is a pleasure and pride, instead of a trouble"—

"Besides, I—I wish that I knew more of these O'Neils," said the colonel uneasily.

"The comte is to be a millionaire one day. He is looked upon as the greatest *parti* in Nice. His family is ancient, noble;" and the baron gave him a look which said, "And what more do you want?"

"Well, and how do he and Ethel get on?" inquired Col. Mildmay lightly.

"Ask mademoiselle. I am not going to tell tales out of school," said the baron, laughing. "Seriously, though, colonel, it seems to me that he is smitten."

"What a match-maker you are, to be sure!" said the colonel, with slightly-contemptuous carelessness. But, for all that, he betrayed himself the next moment. "I knew some relations of theirs once; and I have written,—just to make inquiries, you know, baron. The letter may never reach; but it was as well to"— And then, perceiving that a faint shadow of amusement was lurking round the corners of the baron's mouth, he broke off, and abruptly changed the conversation.

Ethel's visit was in vain. Madame Delneuve and her daughter were out. Thoughtfully, perhaps even a little sadly, she turned homewards again. Christine's story, like the one, which, the other day, her father had told her of his own first love, was ringing in her ears with a melancholy twang. Was it true, then,—was it really true, that

the world was filled with the graves of these lost and wasted loves?—that we are constantly and unconsciously treading upon the faded, perfumeless, and dead flowers and leaves of what were once vigorous and living plants of affection?

The thought pained her: she could not bear it; she put it away from her with a shudder,—no such difficult matter. The world was laughing beneath a blaze of sunshine. There were no signs of sorrow or mourning around. Nice is essentially a gay place, notwithstanding the hosts of invalids who throng there year after year to die. For the most part, they are invisible: at all events, they are overlooked and forgotten in the midst of the lively, busy crowd. Ethel was soon swallowed up in it, and as merry and as thoughtless as her neighbors. She had met Madame O'Neil by chance, and Madame O'Neil had insisted upon a stroll up and down the Promenade. "But papa will be waiting for me," Ethel had objected, faintly, it is true,—so faintly, that she had been quickly overruled.

"It is such a lovely afternoon!" Madame O'Neil had said; "and you have got on such a pretty new dress, it would be a pity not to show it; and your father—ah, the colonel is so good, so kind! he would not have you hurry back for his sake; I know it well."

It was a lovely afternoon, and she was well dressed, and the crisp air had fulfilled the baron's prediction, and had already recalled brightness to her cheeks and eyes. Admiring glances were following her; glad smiles were greeting her. Other causes, too, were contributing, perhaps, to the girl's deepened color and sparkling eyes. Madame O'Neil was improving the rare opportunity of a *tête-à-tête*, and was singing the song of her son,—of this beloved and incomparable Ernest, who was every thing a mother's heart could desire. He was a young man among a thousand: she who should not say it could yet not help saying it. "Not to speak of his prospects, certain prospects"— And here Madame O'Neil paused, and, giving Ethel a sidelong glance, "*A propos*," she said with a studied indifference, "do you know, do you happen to have heard, what Ernest's prospects are, dear child?"

Then she smiled. Ethel was too sincere, and her face was too honest, to be capable of a deception. She might look, as she did on the present occasion, a little guilty and embarrassed; but the truth would out on all occasions. "Yes, I do know; I have heard," she answered bluntly, yet with a blush. "But is all they say quite true,

madame? There is some doubt, some difficulty; is there not?"

It was now Madame O'Neil's turn to be disconcerted by this frank question. "Ah! so you know all about it. Our affairs are at your fingers'-ends; are they?" she said sharply, and with an uncomfortable laugh.

"I beg your pardon. I do not know any thing, madame," Ethel protested. "I have only heard what rumor says."

"So your father has not?" — Then she interrupted herself: "Dear child, rumor has many tongues. Nevertheless, it is slander to say that it does not often speak the truth, — at least, part of it. In the present case, for instance" —

"But I have no wish — I do not want to intrude, to hear family secrets," Ethel interrupted hastily.

"And I, on the contrary, am most anxious that they should be no secrets from you. There is, in fact, another claimant to the property to which Ernest is heir; but his claim is founded upon a chimera, a lie: it exists in the imagination; and it can never be put forward, since it is incapable of proof. Ernest is as certain of succeeding to his grand-uncle Lord O'Neil's wealth and title, as that the sun is above our heads to-day. Dear child, you may believe me."

Ethel drew herself up. "It is nothing to me, madame, of course; but still, for your sake, I am glad."

Then she paused. A hasty and familiar step had overtaken them, and Count O'Neil was by her side.

CHAPTER VI.

DIFFIDENCE was not one of the young man's failings, and he joined the ladies with the air of one who is sure of his welcome. Perhaps he was right. Certainly Miss Mildmay did not look sorry to meet him; though she laughed saucily at the extravagant compliments with which he greeted her. A laugh was, indeed, her usual reply to his ardent glances and sweet speeches. If his devotion disconcerted her now and then, it did not seem much to embarrass her. Madame O'Neil, keenly watching, felt both puzzled and irritated by the girl's slightly-mocking, self-possessed, yet evidently flattered and well-pleased demeanor.

Life consists, however, of other things besides the intricate mysteries of love-making. Presently O'Neil paused in the midst of the delightful occupation of causing

Ethel to laugh and to sparkle and to blush, and turned to his mother.

"By the way, I had forgotten!" he exclaimed; "or, rather, mademoiselle had driven all other thoughts but those of herself out of my head. Mother, I have a piece of news for you. Just look at what, by chance, I saw in the *liste des étrangers* to-day. What a place this Nice is! All the ends of the earth seem to meet in it."

His mother carelessly took the paper which he handed to her, and glanced at the name to which he was pointing. Then she suddenly stood still. "O'Neil!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Ernest, is it — can it be he?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"On my word, it looks rather like it," he said. "'M. et Mme. O'Neil, *Rentier, Irlande*.' Why, it must be my uncle, of course. I declare I am delighted. Here we are face to face with this unprincipled, ill-behaved uncle at last. And madame — who can madame be? My ancient and venerable grandmother. But let us trust that he has buried her at last, and that this is his wife. Heaven knows that it is high time he had a wife. Then there will be children, — another heir, — and matters will become inextricably complicated." And O'Neil rattled along as gayly as though the whole business were the best joke in the world. "Let us go call upon them at once, mother. Hôtel des Anglais. Just imagine if Madame O'Neil turns out to be a young and lovely bride," he concluded enthusiastically.

But his mother viewed things from an altogether different point of view.

"What a *farceur* you are, Ernest!" she said sharply. "Can you not be serious for a single five minutes of your life?"

"For ten, if it did anybody any good. If it were to please you, my mother, I would never laugh again," he assured her dramatically.

Madame O'Neil was serious enough, at all events. It was evident that the intelligence which her son had brought her was a shock, and a very severe one. She was even overcome, — pale and disturbed and strangely altered, all at once.

"No: it is his mother," she said. "Your uncle will hardly have married. If he had, I should doubtless have heard of the event. Well, let them come, and go too," she added angrily. "Nice is a small place, hardly large enough to hold us both, I fancy."

O'Neil was subdued and grave now. His mother's displeasure seemed, in spite of himself, to influence him. Perhaps he saw

surprise in Ethel's eyes; for the young girl was amazed at the sudden emotion which this usually cold, impassive woman was betraying, and she was looking on at the painful little scene with wondering curiosity.

"Come," he said, drawing her away: "we will leave my mother alone for a little. She is pained and worried. She will sit and rest herself — will you not, dear mother? — till we return."

The answer was taken for granted; and the young people walked on, Ethel nothing loath to cease intrusion upon her friends' concerns. So soon as they were out of hearing, O'Neil seemed to feel it incumbent on him to offer some explanation. Not a very lucid one, however, did he give. Indeed, he began by a slightly impatient observation, to the effect that "dirty linen ought to be washed in private," and that to him these family differences and disputes were the most wearisome things in the world. Why fate should have burdened him with a *scélérat* of an uncle was more than he could in the least understand, he protested with a comical mixture of pathos and irritation which made Ethel laugh in spite of herself.

"But is he a real *scélérat*?" she inquired, somewhat awe-struck, in spite of her gayety.

"Yes: a thorough one," O'Neil assured her, waxing warm. "He is a slanderer, a robber, an insulter of my mother's" —

"O Count O'Neil! what dreadful things you are saying!"

"Forgive me: I was forgetting myself. These revolting subjects are not fit for your ears. Forgive me," he repeated, looking eloquently into her eyes. "Let us talk of something else. My mother's quarrels are, of course, mine; but I protest that I wish she had no quarrels. I don't think any amount of wealth is worth being compelled to detest one's relations for. I wish the old imbecile and all his money-bags had never been, or were at the bottom of the sea. My own inclination would lead me to prefer peace and amity, and a modest sufficiency, and — but, of course, were I to marry, it would be different," he said, suddenly altering his tone. "Were I to marry, I would desire to possess the wealth of Cresus, that I might have the pleasure of offering it to my wife."

A sentiment which effectually diverted the course of the conversation from the family differences of the O'Neils. They were young and happy, and they were playing at being in love; and life was before them, — a bright, interminable vista of pleasant things to come.

Presently they had found seats, and had forgotten all about Madame O'Neil, who, poor lady! was left to solitary and disturbed meditations a little way off; and they contemplated the blue sea, and they felt sentimental and spoony, and they spoke in subdued tones, and, in short, they looked and behaved themselves remarkably like a pair of lovers.

Every thing, however, has an end. The interruption to this, no doubt, delightful *tête-à-tête* came but too quickly, — a very abrupt, and by no means a pleasant one. A great Newfoundland dog, fresh from his bath, suddenly bounded into Ethel's close proximity, shaking violently, and to the great ruin of her tender "toilet," his immense, shaggy body, and, in the most friendly manner, proceeding to lay his big, wet paws upon her knees. Needless to say that considerable excitement ensued. Miss Mildmay was frightened; but that was a lesser evil. Her pretty new dress was ruined: at least, she thought that it was; seeing which, Ethel, for a moment, nearly lost her temper. As to O'Neil, he quite lost his. In an instant he was on his feet, breathing fire and vengeance, his smart cane raised to inflict summary vengeance upon the offender; but his arm was caught in the very act, and before the blow fell,

"Don't strike him, pray! Down, Max! Don't strike him, sir!" the owner of the dog, who had been, unnoticed by the young people, sitting for the last few minutes on the same bench with them, called out in English.

But O'Neil was excited and angry; and, shaking his arm free, the cane went up again. "The brute must be taught manners!" he exclaimed. "He shall not terrify a lady another time."

"Yes, he shall be taught manners, but not by you," said the stranger, again interposing to save the dog; but he did so by receiving the blow on his own arm. The next instant he had wrested the cane out of O'Neil's hands.

"Down, Max! Behave yourself!" he said, as the dog, who had been cowering beneath the expected punishment, jumped up on him with gleeful and affectionate demonstrations. "There, be off! Get out of the way of any more blows!" he added, half laughing, — a command which the sagacious animal obeyed with an intelligent wag of his tail.

Then the stranger presented O'Neil with his cane again, but he looked at and spoke to Ethel. "I am sorry for my dog's misbehavior," he said politely. "I hope he did not frighten you."

"The fright is nothing; but he has spoilt my dress," she replied a little sharply. But she was ashamed of herself the next minute. "It does not signify," she added more sweetly; "and—and—I am sorry—I hope that you are not hurt?" she went on, apologetic in her turn, and feeling suddenly ashamed of the foolish fuss about nothing, and of O'Neil's passion and rudeness.

"Hurt! Oh, dear! not at all." And O'Neil, cool again now, though chafing under the degradation of having been taken unawares and deprived of his cane, muttered something to the effect that he had meant to strike the dog; but that, if any satisfaction were required—

"Oh!" deprecated Ethel in an agonized tone. "Pray say no more about it! It does not matter in the least. It was all my fault." And her face was ludicrous in its extreme dismay.

The stranger laughed. "Do not alarm yourself," he said: "I am not of a blood-thirsty disposition, and your friend's explanation is quite sufficient. Here is my card, sir, however, in case you wish to hear any more of either me or my dog. Perhaps you would like to summon us for—for injury to a lady's dress," he said, looking at Ethel again. "I hope that it is not really seriously injured," he added anxiously, with a glance at the pretty dress.

"Oh, no! it is nothing," Ethel assured him with one of her beaming smiles. And then the stranger whistled to his dog, lifted his hat, and wished them both "Good-morning!"

When he was fairly gone, Ethel and O'Neil looked at one another a little foolishly. After all, it had been rather an absurd little episode; and now, in the light of calm reflection, it wore the aspect of a storm in a teakettle. What had it been all about? About a few stains upon a silk dress, which were even now almost faded, and which would not, it appeared, inflict permanent injury.

"He must think us a pair of fools," Miss Mildmay observed half crossly, half disconsolately, breaking the silence first,—a remark in which O'Neil agreed too fully to be able to contradict.

But all disagreeable misgivings were cut short in an instant. The next moment, Ethel believed that her companion had suddenly parted with his senses. He sank back on the bench, clasping his forehead wildly, and looking as if he had been shot.

"My goodness! What is the matter? what has happened?" Ethel cried in great alarm.

O'Neil was blankly gazing at the card which had just been given him; and now he handed it to her in silence. She could hardly believe her eyes. On it were written the magical words,—

"MR. O'NEIL,
Hôtel des Anglais."

Needless to say, after this discovery, Ethel's one anxiety was to rid her friends of the *gêne* of her company, as much, too, for her own sake as for theirs. The day had been an eventful one; and she wanted to be alone, and to think over it all. For the first time in her life, it had brought her face to face with that, to youth, delightful episode,—a stirring, thrilling mystery. These O'Neils were, one and all of them, a mystery. Madame O'Neil's sudden and angry emotion was mysterious; her son's guarded reticence on the subject of the family quarrel was mysterious; and crowning mystery of all was this handsome, well-bred uncle, whom such an odd chance had, for the first time to-day, brought across his unknown nephew's path. In short, Miss Mildmay felt as though a new and thrilling page of life were being opened to her amazed eyes; and, as these new and thrilling pages are likely to make us forget such commonplace facts as hours, it is not astonishing that she was a little late for dinner that evening. So entirely, indeed, had recent events put such sublunary matters out of her mind, that, long after she had been left by her friends at the gate of the Villa Balni, she remained wandering about the picturesque, uncared-for garden, in a sort of dream-mood, rehearsing in her mind all that she had been seeing and hearing, her brain busy inventing theories and explanations, and so absorbed that she was oblivious of the passing-away of time.

Such an evening as it was!—an ideal evening even amongst the beautiful evenings of Nice. The air crisp and clear; the earth sweetly smelling of lowly, unseen violets, of orange and lemon groves, of a wild profusion of aromatic shrubs and plants, of the fast-coming spring, which was all but ready to burst into life, and, with its magic touch, to convert it into a garden of paradise. And the sky,—such a pale, tender sky! Such graceful clouds tinged with a hundred shades! Such a blinding flood of orange light fading in the west into delicate pinks and greens and violets, such as are both the delight and despair of an artist's eye! and the big, bright stars one by one tak-

ing their appointed places, and sparkling like diamonds in a bed of wonderful color! and then the glistening, unruffled sea, and the purple mountains, and distant peaks of crimsoned snow, pointing like fingers from earth to heaven! — ah! these are things which we cannot describe, but only feel; and before which one bows down, confounded, overwhelmed, and enchanted all at once.

Ethel, for one, felt something of all this. By degrees, and insensibly, the excited dreams of the last few weeks, the anxious rivalries, the petty triumphs, the gratified vanities, even the all-absorbing O'Neil mystery, faded from her mind, and a sudden feeling of disgust and self-reproach came to her. How changed she seemed to have become! how self-engrossed and silly, and unkind and neglectful! — unkind and neglectful to her own father too; forgetful of his wishes, impatient of his company, unsympathizing with his sufferings. Ah! Nature was preaching to her then, as it often does to all of us, a more eloquent sermon than words, and, with her serene and thrilling beauties, was whispering a heart-lesson to which it was impossible to turn a deaf and careless ear.

One little simple lesson she whispered to Ethel just then. The sun had disappeared; the sky was deepening with the coming night. Dinner must be waiting, and, for dinner, her father. From the sublime to the ridiculous! Ethel herself actually became conscious of an appetite, and hurried towards the house with a sudden eagerness. On the terrace she met the servant starting in search for her. It was very late. The colonel was uneasy, and had ordered him to go and make inquiries at Madame O'Neil's house.

Ashamed and confused, Ethel hastened to the drawing-room; but, when she opened the door, her protestations and excuses died away on her lips.

A big dog, which had been lying on the rug, jumped up with a friendly, familiar bark, at the sound of which, a gentleman, seated near her father's sofa, rose suddenly, and, seeing her, stared at her blankly. Ethel gave him his change, and stared too; but she was not so astonished as he was. The dog was Max, and the gentleman was Max's master.

Col. Mildmay introduced her. "This is Ethel," he said shortly, but with a glance and smile which told who Ethel was.

And then they shook hands; and Mr. O'Neil told her that he was very glad to see her "again," he said meaningly. "But are you really Miss Mildmay?" he inquired, looking at her with an incredulous smile.

"Yes, I really am myself," she answered, laughing.

It took a few minutes to elucidate matters, and to satisfy Col. Mildmay's curiosity. Mr. O'Neil related the history of the famous encounter; despatched it quickly and rather carelessly Ethel noticed with a slight sense of mortification, as though it were a small business, already half forgotten. The only matter which seemed to have left any impression on his mind was the damage done to the dress.

"How are the stains?" he inquired. "I assure you, Miss Mildmay, that, though I saved Max from your — your friend's vengeance, I gave him a great lecture myself. Look at him! He is quite well aware that he behaved very badly, and has promised never to do it again. Won't you forgive him this time, before I turn him out of the room; for he knows very well that he has no business to be in a lady's drawing-room without her leave?"

"Oh! he may remain. Please let him remain. Of course, I have forgiven him long ago," Ethel protested. And, to prove that her forgiveness was sincere, she knelt down by the dog, and put her arm round his neck, and pinched his jetty ears with her small white hand. They made a pretty picture, the girl and the dog; and, luckily, Ethel was quite unconscious that her father and Mr. O'Neil were both contemplating it with smiling, well-pleased eyes. Her thoughts were otherwise engaged.

"By the way, you did not know your nephew just now, Mr. O'Neil," she said, suddenly looking up at him. "What an odd chance it was that made you meet him!"

"My nephew, who — pray whom do you mean?" Mr. O'Neil inquired, looking mystified.

"Count O'Neil, to be sure. Your nephew."

"Is it possible? Do you mean to say — He is not my nephew, though," he added quickly.

"Not your nephew!"

"Do you mean to say that it was really he," proceeded Mr. O'Neil, without heeding her. "Well, it is an odd chance certainly."

Then he laughed. "And to think that we might actually have fought a duel, and about you, Miss Mildmay, — about your dress. You know that you were greatly alarmed, and afraid that we really did mean to fight; were you not?"

"Count O'Neil was quite ready, I am sure," Ethel replied, flushing up angrily beneath his railing.

But at this, not only Mr. O'Neil, but her

father, laughed too. "Come, come, you silly child! let us hope that he is not such a fool," Col. Mildmay said, patting her fair head as she still knelt on the floor.

And then, luckily for Ethel's dignity, dinner was announced, and no more was said about the duel.



CHAPTER VII.

"O'NEIL has kindly consented to stay for dinner, Ethel," Col. Mildmay told his daughter; and there was nothing left for Miss Mildmay to do but to accept Mr. O'Neil's proffered arm, and to allow herself to be led into the dining-room.

It was an uncomfortable meal: at least Ethel found it so; and, in a party of three, it is difficult for one to be ill at ease, without making the two others feel ill at ease too.

It must be confessed that Ethel did not do the honors of her father's table particularly well that evening. She was silent, constrained, stiff, ungracious even. All her guest's efforts could hardly win a smile from her. He tried to amuse her, but failed: he tried to interest her, but was repulsed. She would not for a single instant allow herself to forget that Count O'Neil had called him a "villain," and that, for some mysterious reason or other, he was the natural enemy of her friends.

So Mr. O'Neil gave it up at last, and devoted himself to her father. Ethel was thankful when the meal was over, and she was at liberty to make her escape, and to puzzle out her perplexities, and to indulge her meditations in solitude. Not another word had been dropped about Count O'Neil all through dinner. Whether through accident or design, the conversation had been confined to general subjects, and not a single allusion to family affairs made. Mr. O'Neil had talked of his mother, and Ethel had been made aware that she was travelling with him; but no other member of this strange family had been mentioned; and Ethel's curiosity was keener and more at a loss than ever.

And keener and keener it was destined to grow. The fact was, that the girl was rather to be pitied that evening, and fate treated her with some unkindness. It was one of the very few evenings upon which she was not going out; there being no great temptation contrariwise, she had made up her mind to be a dutiful daughter, and

to devote it to her father. She had been quite looking forward to it, and had meant to make it a pleasant evening for him,—as, indeed, she knew very well that she could,—to read to him, to talk to him, to play chess with him, to sing to him,—any thing, every thing; in short, to have one of the old dull, happy *tête-à-tête* evenings again.

But "Man proposes, and God disposes." Here were all her loving anticipations put at nought, and her dutiful services dispensed with. Of all evenings it was the most unfortunate one she could have chosen for her little piece of self-sacrifice, if sacrifice it was. Hour after hour went by; and Ethel was left alone in the drawing-room, while her father and his friend remained over their wine and coffee in the dining-room.

It was certainly provoking. The clock struck eight and half-past eight, and nine and half-past nine, even ten; and still, though Ethel had sent to remind them that tea was ready, they never came. She heard the subdued sounds of their voices through the closed doors, scarcely pausing for an instant, but that was all; and the reflection that most probably the conversation related to the very subject on which of all others she was burning to be enlightened, and that the famous mystery was, in all likelihood, under discussion, did not, we may be sure, tend to lessen her sense of exasperation and aggravation.

At last, at ten o'clock, her patience fairly worn out, she made up her mind that she would wait no longer, but go to bed; and at that very moment the door was opened, and the two gentlemen made their appearance.

Mr. O'Neil had only come to say good-night. "I am afraid that I have tired your father out, Miss Mildmay," he said, shaking hands. "The time went so quickly, that I had no notion that it was so late." And then he told her that he must run away. "My mother is old and fanciful, and will imagine all sorts of misfortunes if I am late."

"We will call upon Mrs. O'Neil to-morrow," Col. Mildmay said: "at what hour shall we be likely to find her? Two, or half-past, I suppose?"

"At any hour that suits you, my mother would be very glad to make your acquaintance," he said to Ethel.

But Miss Mildmay's principles would not allow her to give any thing but a short reply to this. Her father had, by his eagerness, to make up for her frigidity.

"We will certainly call to-morrow. I am most anxious that Ethel should know Mrs. O'Neil," he said warmly, and giving

his daughter a surprised, almost displeased look. And then Mr. O'Neil said good-night, and departed.

"Well, papa?" inquired Ethel, so soon as the door had closed behind him.

"Well, dear?" and he lay back on the sofa and closed his eyes, which was more than mortal forbearance could stand.

"Oh, but, papa; *please* tell me!" Ethel entreated, coming over and kneeling down by his side.

"Tell you what, love? Oh! about O'Neil. It is odd, is it not, how things turn out? I believe that you know that I wrote to his mother about a fortnight or three weeks ago. I wrote to their Irish address; but the letter was sent to them to Mentone, where they had been within an hour or two of us for the last six weeks. Now they have come to stay at Nice for a little; and Mr. O'Neil very kindly brought me the answer to my letter himself to-day."

"And"—inquired Ethel as he paused.

"And I am very glad that you should know them, dear. They are the oldest friends I have," replied the unecommunicative colonel.

"But how can I know them on account of the other O'Neils, papa, since they are not friends?"

"Oh!" and Col. Mildmay was silent: then he said, "It is unpleasant and rather awkward certainly; but these things will happen, and they must be made the best of. I do not wish you to be guilty of any rudeness, Ethel. There are two ways of doing every thing; and a clever girl like you will always select the right way. By degrees, and with a little tact, you can manage to see less of Madame O'Neil without mortally affronting her; can you not, love? In fact, I may as well tell you at once that the acquaintance is not a peculiarly desirable one, and the sooner it is dropped the better."

Ethel jumped to her feet, flushing crimson. "I'll do nothing of the sort!" she exclaimed vehemently. "I am not going to give up my friends for the sake of—at the first slanderous word which that horrid Mr. O'Neil chooses to say of them. Papa, what a shame! Surely, you could not expect me to do such a mean, unkind thing?"

"Ethel!" And Col. Mildmay rose too, and looked at her in amazement. For the first time in their lives, father and daughter stood confronting one another, angry and excited. It was a painful and not easily-to-be-forgotten moment. Col. Mildmay was the first to recover himself.

"I am sorry that I was so abrupt," he said. "It is unfortunate; but—but, after

all, you cannot care so *very* much, dear," he added with a half-smile: "you know Madame O'Neil barely three weeks: the friendship cannot be so very close."

"It is not Madame O'Neil only," began Ethel impetuously; and then she checked herself.

But her father heard the words, and looked very grave all at once. "It is unfortunate," he repeated after a little pause, and with one of his frequent, weary sighs,—"very unfortunate. I have been much to blame. But a mistake must be repaired, and not increased. Ethel, in this instance, you must—you will trust in me and obey me." He spoke very quietly, and in an almost exhausted voice, but in a tone of decision and sharpness such as his daughter had never heard before, and which, unfortunately, angered her more than it impressed her.

"I will not do a mean or disloyal thing to please anybody," she said passionately. "Madame O'Neil and her son are my friends. I like them. Why should I not like them?" she demanded tremulously.

But Col. Mildmay's temper was fairly roused now. "It ought to be enough to you to know that I do not choose you to like them," he said; "and, in your present state of mind, it is useless giving you reasons. To-morrow we will talk about it; to-night I am both too ill and tired to say another word."

In spite of herself, Ethel was subdued by this, and by her father's unusually haggard and worn face. The staring signs of disease and pain are a sort of last appeal,—a rock against which the waves of human passions and interests beat and storm in vain; and Ethel, blind as she was and wished to be, could not but see something at least of these signs now. And so she checked the quick words which were but too ready to come, and was silent; but that was all. She was neither convinced, nor softened, nor remorseful, nor penitent. She was angry still, and on pins and needles of irritation and aggravation, and of defeated, long-enduring curiosity; for, after all, she found herself now to be just as much in the dark as ever; and, owing to her own want of temper, the wished-for explanation was again deferred. There was nothing to be done, however. The moment of grace had gone by; the opportunity for a contrite word or look, and for a reconciliation, had been allowed to pass. Her father had already left her with a cold, constrained "good-night," such as never in their lives before had passed between them; and she found herself alone in the big, silent room, with a dull, sickening pain at her heart, of

which this was her first, and not easily-forgotten experience.

But youth is youth ; and, in spite of every thing, it generally manages to sleep. In spite of remorse and bewilderment, and anxiety and excitement, Ethel, after a few hours' restless tossing and unhappiness, slept to awake to a bright exhilarating burst of sunshine, and to see the aspect of things in general from a more placid and less melodramatic point of view. Sleep is one of our kindest friends. His gentle touch works many a miracle of change of heart and feeling between night and morning, and the mortal over whom it still holds an influence cannot be utterly miserable.

Ethel slept soundly, and it was her maid's voice which awoke her. "A letter, miss," the smart English voice was saying, "and it is nine o'clock. The colonel will be wanting his breakfast immediately."

Nine o'clock ! and Ethel was generally up at seven. In an instant she was out of bed, and hurrying over her toilet, while the letter lay on the table unthought of. It was not till the last moment, when she was leaving her room, that she remembered it; and it was on the stairs, on her way to her father's room, that she read it. It was from Madame O'Neil, and covered four pages; yet it only contained a request that Ethel should come to see her that morning. She was not well, it said, and could not venture out herself. The day was long and dull, and her young friend was kind and amiable, and would help her to pass an hour. This was the pith of the letter; but there were many professions of affection, and nice, well-turned compliments and sweet things, such as Frenchwomen know so well how to write, in it besides. Ethel skimmed it all through hastily, and then thrust it into her pocket as she knocked at her father's door for leave to enter. Twenty-four hours ago she would have shown it to him, or told him about it, as a matter of course; but now, instinctively, she concealed it from him.

And some similar instinct prevented her from mentioning the name of O'Neil during breakfast. Perhaps she was waiting for her father to begin, or he for her. At all events, neither did, in fact, begin; and by mutual consent last night's quarrel was never even alluded to. It was in the colonel's room that they breakfasted. By degrees he was falling into invalid habits; and often Ethel was sent for, as he was unable to come down stairs. However, this morning he did not complain, but, on the contrary, seemed cheerful and well. They talked of a hundred things. They laughed and jested. Apparently all was right between them

again. The colonel's spirits were generally best in the morning; and, if the truth were to be known, neither he nor his daughter was more anxious than the other to avoid any subject which might disturb them.

It was not till breakfast was quite over, and that she was leaving him, that the word was at last said, which, with a sort of feverish expectation, she had been waiting for. "Order the carriage at two o'clock to-day, love, and make yourself pretty and smart," her father called after her. "Remember, we are to go to see old Mrs. O'Neil."

And Ethel answered, "Yes!" and went her way with a downcast, thoughtful look. Presently she paused upon the staircase, standing quite still. The sun was pouring down through the glass dome of the villa upon her wavy fair hair, turning it all into a bright gold. She was so quiet that she might have been a statue; though her heart was beating fast, and her brain was busy at work. The girl was making a choice, such as, now and then, we all make as we journey on through life, — a choice between the safe old beaten track to which we are accustomed, and of which we are growing a little tired, and the new and dangerous one, which, at least, has the charm of being unfamiliar, — a choice between old friends and habits, and new ones; between — though this we do not admit even to ourselves — right and wrong. Ethel was debating whether she would go back to her father and hear Madame O'Neil's story from him, or go to Madame O'Neil and hear it from herself.

Trivial causes are frequently the causes of great events. A little bunch of flowers was the straw in the balance of the girl's decision. They were faded and perfumeless; but what did that matter! When they had been given, they had probably been but lightly valued, to judge from the careless fashion in which they had been stuffed into her pocket, — Ethel's receptacle for many queer odds and ends. But all this was nothing. O'Neil had given them to her, accompanying them, probably, by one of his ardent compliments, which had most likely been rewarded by a mocking laugh at the time. But all this signified nothing. By chance, the flowers were drawn out from the pocket now, with Madame O'Neil's letter, which the girl wished to look over again; and, withered as they were, they must have spoken an eloquent and mischievous language of their own. At all events, they made up her mind for her; and in ten minutes she was dressed and on her way to Madame

O'Neil's house; and in another ten or fifteen she found herself *tête-à-tête* with that lady in the tiny drawing-room of her pleasant little apartment.

Madame O'Neil, it is true, occasionally wrote long-winded and ornate letters; but her speech was generally direct and plain-spoken enough. This morning, at all events, she went to the point at once. "So Arthur O'Neil spent the evening at the villa," she remarked after the customary embrace, and seating Ethel in a delightful easy-chair right opposite to her. "Do tell me all about him, dear child. I am dying of impatience to know."

Ethel was taken aback. "How do you know that he spent the evening with us, madame?" she inquired, opening her frank eyes wide.

"*Mon Dieu!* one knows every thing at Nice. All the houses are provided with invisible glasses, which reflect the doings of their inhabitants for the benefit of the outside world. What does it signify *how* I know, if I know? And what do you think of him? How do you like him?" she went on. "It is years since I have seen him!"

"He is good-looking and gentlemanlike. I don't care much about him," Ethel answered in short, indifferent tones, and leaning back in her chair.

Madame O'Neil laughed, feeling that she had come across a rather tough bit of British nationality. But it was by no means too tough for her digestion. She had been in a hurry, and had wanted to save time; but, if her young friend needed a little coaxing, by all means she must have it. So she said, changing her tone, and drawing her chair closer to that of the young girl, "Come, dear child, you are provoked and put out, I know, at what you imagine to have been a prying-into, an intrusion upon, your domestic privacy. But you are mistaken. To me nothing is more intolerably wearisome than the petty annals of my neighbors' affairs. My own are more than sufficiently interesting and absorbing. It was by the merest chance — your cook, I believe, who met mine at market, or some equally trivial accident — that I heard that my brother-in-law dined with your father last night. Having heard it, however, I confess that I am curious to know your impressions of him; curious, and a little anxious too, dear Ethel," she said with a deprecating sort of smile, "since, it may be that you will have to choose between him and me, — between him and *us*, rather," with a meaning emphasis upon the little word. "There is a

quarrel between us, as you know; and somehow I hardly think that Arthur O'Neil will be very well pleased to discover that you are — almost as a child to me, and — I hope I may say it — that you like me."

A speech which, spoken as it was with an unusual sweetness and softness, mollified Ethel at once.

"I beg your pardon, madame, I was cross just now, I know," she said impetuously; "but I was worried and tormented. Mr. O'Neil's pleasure — what he likes, or what he does not like — is nothing to me;" and she flushed and sparkled.

Madame O'Neil looked at her attentively. Then she said with a quiet smile, "So Arthur has told you the story; has he? — his side of it I mean, of course. Truly, he does not let the grass grow beneath his feet."

"He has told me no story. Papa knows it, I believe; but I know nothing. Madame, I have come to you to hear it. Will you tell me?" and Ethel spoke breathlessly, and looked pleading and excited.

"You are a noble girl," said Madame O'Neil, with an admiring glance; "and I wish that I were not the only one to hear you and see you now. Yes, I will tell you, since it is from me that you wish to hear it — since I am a friend to whom you prefer to come for the truth, rather than listen to the slanderous, cruel tales of my enemies. For my part, I have no desire to keep you in ignorance; and yet — and yet — *how* can I tell you!" and her voice faltered.

"Madame, I can, I will, believe nothing against you;" and, with one of the sudden impulses which were her greatest charm, Ethel threw her arms round Madame O'Neil's neck, and kissed her warmly.

Madame O'Neil returned her embrace, and thanked her. It was quite a little scene. There were tears and emotion, and kisses and promises, an outburst of feminine effusion and tenderness, and excitement. As Madame O'Neil had said a moment ago, it was a pity that there were no witnesses to it; for Ethel's warm feelings became her, and might well have enkindled other hearts besides her own. But it was early, and the count was hardly awake yet: rubbing his eyes and sipping his morning cup of coffee a couple of rooms off, he was quite unconscious of the pretty *tableau* which was going on in the drawing-room. Presently the two ladies had recovered themselves, and were calm again; and then, at last, Madame O'Neil began, in a voice which was painfully cold and constrained, —

"Twenty-four years ago circumstances, which I have not time now to relate,

brought my sister Marianne and me to Ireland. We were not there six months before we were both married,—I, into a position which was higher than I had a right to expect; she, into one that was beneath her. I married Bernard O'Neil, Lord O'Neil's nephew, and heir to his enormous wealth. Marianne married the steward or bailiff or agent—I know not what they call it—of Lord O'Neil's estates. My husband's family was furious. From the day of my marriage, they began a persecution against me which has never ceased, and to which their intentions, I believe, are before long to put the crowning stroke. But fortune has been and is against them, and they will never succeed. For a little while I was happy. My husband and I went abroad and travelled, and left the O'Neils to rage and rail at home; but sorrow came but too quickly. Bernard died suddenly of a fever, caught in Rome; and, after a few months' marriage, I found myself a widow. But, though happiness was dead, hope was alive still; and I was, thank Heaven! able to look forward to the time when I should become a mother. Resolved, for reasons that you can guess, that my child should be born in its father's country and in the midst of his family, I returned to Ireland; and there I found my sister also expecting the same happiness as myself. The O'Neils would not receive me, and so I remained with her. Within a month or six weeks of one another, our children were born. Hers died; but mine lived. They were both boys—Ethel, must I go on? Can you guess nothing? Have you no suspicion of the cruel lie which the O'Neils have invented against me?"

The girl shook her head. Then a gleam of light darted right into her brain. "O madame! I can't understand. I do not—oh! is it *that?*" she exclaimed, breathless and dismayed.

Madame O'Neil half smiled. "No wonder that you are horror-struck," she said. "As to me, I have borne the weight of calumny so long that I am almost accustomed to it. Yes! it is *that*. It is that I am an impostor, an adventuress. It is that Ernest is not my son, but that of my sister. It is, that, instead of being Lord O'Neil's heir, he is the child of Lord O'Neil's steward. It means that his uncle, Arthur O'Neil, has done, and will do, his best to defraud him of his rights,—rights which Ernest, in spite of them all, is well able to assert and protect."

The painful tension of self-restraint had almost given way, and excitement had raised Madame O'Neil's voice to a pitch

which made the silence that followed her words seem doubly still. As to Ethel, she was too shocked and bewildered, almost indeed terrified, to speak. Madame O'Neil waited in vain for a remark upon her narrative. Ethel was incapable of uttering a single word.

"Lord O'Neil persists in living," her companion went on, after a painful and breathless pause. "His life is but a burden to himself and to others; still he lives. At his death, which cannot be now long delayed, Ernest will, of course, take possession of his property. His uncle threatens much,—a lawsuit,—Heaven knows what not; but in my opinion, and, better still, in the opinion of those with whom I have consulted, he will be able even to attempt but little."

"What a shame! how cruel! what a pity!" Ethel exclaimed, recovering her breath at last. "O Madame O'Neil! it is not true?—of course, it is not true?" she said in a sudden tone of distress and doubt.

"What is not true?—that I am an impostor, and that Ernest is not my son? What a strange question to make to me!" and Madame O'Neil tried to laugh.

"I beg your pardon,—I beg your pardon a hundred times: of course, I did not mean that,—I meant—oh, how terrible it all is!" she said, clasping her hands with a quick, painful gesture, and looking quite white and dazed. "And to think that papa"—

"Ah! so the colonel is on the other side," observed Madame O'Neil, as Ethel paused abruptly. "Arthur O'Neil has convinced him of my wickedness; has he?" and she looked at the young girl closely.

Ethel winced. "Mr. O'Neil and his mother are old friends of papa's, I believe," she faltered, half crying.

"His mother! ah, a charming old lady," said Madame O'Neil, with a thoughtful, uncomfortable smile. "I believe that she detests me twice as much as her son does; which is, after all, natural," she added, laughing. "The crime of marrying a son against a mother's wish is, beyond a doubt, one of the unforgivable sins."

"But why?" began Ethel; and then she stopped, feeling that, in such a moment, curiosity was indiscreet. "It is terrible!" she repeated, drawing a long breath. It was all that she could say. And, indeed, the future was looming before her, dark, involved, complicated, strewn with difficulties without end or escape.

Madame O'Neil contemplated her disturbed and anxious face for a little. Then she said kindly, "Come, at all events you

must not distress yourself: it will be all right, take my word for it. I feel no fear for Ernest; why should you?"

"It is not that exactly," said Ethel hastily and with a blush: "I am not thinking of the future, but of the present."

"You mean the difficulties of the moment?" said Madame O'Neil quickly. "Poor child! yours is a difficult position, certainly,—between the two cross-fires, as it were. But if you wish to sacrifice us"—

"No, no, no!" protested Ethel; and her companion smiled, and stroked her hand. "Dear child!" and then, in a half-whisper, she added, "I wish Ernest had heard that!"

"Nonsense!" said the girl very shortly; and she looked so distressed, that Madame O'Neil was puzzled, and half regretted her words. "Come!" she said, laughing, "I am stupid, silly, and bungling, as old mothers often are. We will not think of that *vaurien* of an Ernest, but of more important matters. Do not distress yourself, dear child: you will see that things will right themselves. In the first place, Mrs. O'Neil, you may be sure, will not long remain in Nice. She is a confirmed oddity, if not worse;" and she tapped her forehead significantly. "It is in the family, you know; and then her great age"—

"I wish that they would go away at once, to-morrow, to-day!" exclaimed Ethel fervently.

"Well, they will not stop long, you will see. I believe that one of her peculiarities is to fancy that every place she is in disagrees with her health, poor old creature! While they are here, we shall probably see each other a little seldomly, *voilà tout*. We will naturally avoid them, and they us; and this will render your intercourse with us more constrained. But it will be but for a little while."

"But, papa!"—began Ethel.

"Ah, your father!—yes, to be sure;" and Madame O'Neil looked contemplative. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Even that difficulty may be solved sooner and easier than we expect," she said half aloud. But she did not explain in what manner; and Ethel was spared the pang of guessing at her meaning. At the moment, the clock on the mantelpiece struck. "Oh, how late it is!" she cried, jumping up. "Papa will wonder what has become of me."

Madame O'Neil did not press her to stay. "I will not be guilty of causing you to be late for your father's *déjeuner*," she said, smiling. "If it were not for that, I would ask you to remain to share ours.

But we must be cautious and prudent now; must we not?" she added playfully.

Ethel said "Yes;" though the saying of it made her heart feel sore. That "yes" seemed, somehow, to be the sealing of a compact,—a compact of deceit and dissimulation.

Then she put on her hat, and Madame O'Neil kissed her, and they exchanged farewells. "Not farewell, but '*au revoir*,'" remarked Madame O'Neil. "As the baron says, there are no farewells in Nice."

"*Au revoir*," repeated Ethel; and then she went away, hurrying on the homeward road in silence,—a silence so deep and absorbed that her maid, after two or three useless efforts to disturb it, gave up the attempt in despair.

CHAPTER VIII.

ETHEL reached the villa in good time for luncheon; and, either from lack of curiosity or on principle, her father made no inquiry as to where the morning had been spent. It was not till the meal was over, and they were actually on the way to pay the promised visit at the Hôtel des Anglais, that Col. Mildmay made the first allusion to the subject which was secretly embarrassing them both.

"I may as well tell you," he began rather abruptly, "what O'Neil told me last night. You will have to know it, of course."

"I do know it," Ethel replied.

"How?" and her father turned round in the carriage sharply.

Ethel hesitated for half a second; but of course she told the truth.

"Madame O'Neil told me this morning. I went to see her, and she told me every thing,—the horrid, cruel lie!"

"I do not consider it a lie; and, what is more, you will not, either, in a little while," replied her father. Then, after a short silence, he went on, "If your acquaintance with Madame O'Neil is to continue, Ethel, either she or we must leave Nice."

His daughter's only reply was an indignant flush. The short drive was over, and they had already reached the hotel. Mrs. O'Neil was at home; and they were ushered up the broad staircase and into the starting, gaudily-furnished *salon*. It was a large room; and in it was a very little woman,—such a trim, dainty, tiny woman, that for an instant Ethel forgot the realities

of life, and imagined her to be a fairy. It was Mrs. O'Neil. And Mrs. O'Neil, when her visitors appeared at the door, ran forward to meet them with all the impetuosity of youth; and, before Ethel or her father quite knew what was happening, she had kissed them both, with, considering their respective heights, an extraordinary dexterity and grace.

It was a comic situation; but the manœuvre was so rapidly executed that there was no time to laugh at it.

"I am so glad to see you!" she chirruped gleefully, as she took each by a hand, and looked up at them with beaming eyes. "Why did you not come earlier? It was a shame for Arthur to mention such a late hour. I have been longing for you all the morning, and only for you I would have left this horrible place long ago. Bless my soul! what a great girl you are!" she concluded, drawing a long breath, and with her bright brown eyes scanning Ethel from head to foot.

"Am I?" inquired Miss Mildmay, looking down at the diminutive figure from the serene height of five feet four in her stockings, and smiling in spite of herself.

"Immense, child,—immense! Where in the world did you get such a tall daughter, Henry?"

"Her mother was tall," replied the colonel with a laugh and a sigh.

"Ah!" and Mrs. O'Neil looked thoughtful. "I don't admire tall women," she said, then tossing her head, and looking a little vicious.

Ethel was laughing outright now. Evidently Mrs. O'Neil had no objection to be a subject of hilarity; for she contemplated the young girl with a kind smile.

"And you are a pretty girl too, my dear," she pursued approvingly,—"very pretty indeed, as girls go nowadays. In my time it was different, but"—Then she got up on tiptoes, and somehow or other succeeded in getting her mouth close to Ethel's ear. "I said I did not like tall women, my dear, because my daughter Nora was short," she whispered; "and your father went and married somebody else, though, to be sure, Nora would not have him." And she looked into Ethel's eyes, and nodded significantly, as much as to say that now she knew all about it.

Such a pretty little woman as she was!—prejudiced Ethel could not help seeing it and acknowledging it,—such a delicate pink-and-white complexion! such soft, tender, Irish eyes! such silky snowy curls all round the small well-shaped head! and then such a perfect and suitable dress

of rich, comfortable, black-figured satin, with soft lace collar and cuffs, and a cap to match with a steady yet faintly-coquettish bow of warm, bright ribbon! In fact, it was perfect,—a perfect picture of serene and joyous old age.

After this confidential communication, they sat down, and Mrs. O'Neil heaved a sigh of relief.

"It cranes my neck to look up at you," she remarked; "but on chairs we are all pretty much of an equality, and can talk at our ease. Well, Henry, and how are you? What have you been doing? and how have you been ever since?"

"I have not been doing much good, as you may see, Mrs. O'Neil," said Col. Mildmay with a sad little laugh.

"Ah, well!" and her kind eyes surveyed him anxiously. "Nonsense, child! You must keep a heart, whatever you do. Never fear but that you will get well enough once the summer comes and you are home again. Talk of climate, indeed! To my mind, the climate of Ireland is as good as any other. You will just come over and pay us a visit this year, and we will see what wonders the Atlantic breezes will do for you."

"Blow me off the face of the earth altogether, I am afraid," replied Col. Mildmay, smiling.

"Not at all. Why, they are like a baby's breath in comparison to the cutting winds to which we are exposed in these parts. It is my firm belief that the doctors are tired of us, and want to get rid of us, when they send us to foreign countries,—all except Dr. O'Toole, who is the only sensible and honest man of the profession I know. If I had minded him, I'd be at home now in a comfortable house, well warmed with bright turf-fires, and with good wholesome food, instead of gadding about the world in search of a climate, and getting my death of cold from draughts and ill-aired beds. They call this the best hotel and the best room in the hotel, and I give you my word that through every window there blows a hurricane." And she shuddered and held up her hands.

"I thought the room felt very comfortable," observed Ethel with a half-groan; the truth being, that, owing to a hot sun and a lighted stove, it was almost unbearably warm.

"Too comfortable for you, I am afraid," said a voice behind her. "You find it too warm; don't you?" And turning round she found herself being shaken hands with by Mr. O'Neil.

"Ah, my dear! young ears and eyes and

teeth and bones never feel any thing. How old are you, child?" she demanded abruptly.

"Nineteen and a quarter, about," replied Ethel gayly. "I was counting it all up this morning."

"My goodness! is it possible? Why, I thought you were a baby, and you turn out to be a young woman. Bless me, Henry! is she as old as that? How on earth did you manage? What a hurry time is in, to be sure! Why, I almost forgot that you are not a boy yourself, like Arthur over there. But you are a good bit older than Arthur; are you not?" she inquired anxiously, and putting on her spectacles for a close observation and comparison.

"There is no denying the fact. Bernard and I were contemporaries," said the colonel, laughing.

"Ah, yes! that was it. And then came Nora; and then Ellen, who died; and then—a good while afterwards—Arthur. But he might as well have been first as last, for the matter of that," added Mrs. O'Neil disconsolately. "He is getting as gray as a badger already."

An announcement which was received with much amusement. Ethel glanced at Mr. O'Neil. He was looking into the opposite mirror; and, though he laughed, his countenance wore a slightly rueful expression.

"Yes, indeed," pursued the old lady vivaciously. "And he will never be persuaded to try the simplest remedies. Ah! you may laugh; but for all that it is no joke. Such a disadvantage as it is to a man—to a young man—to be gray!"

"But I am not a young man," observed Mr. O'Neil.

"Stuff and nonsense! you *are* young. A man is young till he marries: a woman is young so long as she can manage to look it. And, Arthur, though you say that you don't intend to marry, you know it is all moonshine. Everybody marries sooner or later. Look at the colonel there, who vowed and declared that he would never marry any one but Nora; and yet he changed his mind, you see, and"—

"You find the room too warm; don't you? Come out on the balcony, and let us leave my mother and your father to talk over old times together," Mr. O'Neil said hastily to Ethel at this point of the conversation. "They are not old times to her," he added, as, having no sufficient reason to refuse, she rose, and approached the window. "She lives in them, and sometimes forgets that it did not all happen yesterday."

"Poor thing!" said Ethel, with a touch of compassion in her voice.

"Why 'poor thing'?" demanded Mr. O'Neil a little sharply. "My mother is the last person in the world to be pitied, I assure you."

Ethel was silent, and looked embarrassed.

"You don't mean to say," pursued Mr. O'Neil, "that—you have quite misunderstood my meaning, Miss Mildmay. My mother's mind is quite as sound, and her memory every bit as good, as yours or mine."

He spoke sharply, almost angrily; and Ethel felt nearly ready to cry with shame and vexation over the awkward predicament in which she had placed herself.

"I beg your pardon," she said: "I did not mean to hurt your feelings, or to offend you. I only heard something, and then I thought that— You are so hasty! You frightened me," she concluded, knowing with a woman's instinct that depreciation was her best chance.

"Do I? I am so sorry!" and she felt at once that he was appeased. "Forgive me. I am hasty, I know; but the fact is that on that subject I am sensitive, and apt to lose my temper. I have been worried by reports and insinuations about it, which I know have been spread by—persons who do not wish us well exactly," he said with a short laugh.

Ethel said nothing; but she was conscious that her face was a tell-tale one, and that her companion was studying it closely. They were out on the balcony now. Before them was the shining blue sea, and beneath the usual gay crowd assembling on the Promenade for its afternoon stroll.

"There is Count O'Neil," said Ethel a little breathlessly, after a moment or two of silence; and she leant quite eagerly over the balcony. The young man could not have heard the exclamation, yet chance made him at the moment raise his eyes and see her. He was sauntering past with some other men, who all bowed, and waved their hands, gesticulating in true French fashion; Count O'Neil's expressive eyes conveying even from that distance a volume of meaning,—surprised and angry meaning too,—as she saw very well. She drew back hastily, and blushed crimson.

"What a horrid place this Nice is!" she exclaimed impatiently.

"Do you think so? I rather like it," replied Mr. O'Neil coolly.

"Then will you remain? How long do you mean to remain?" she inquired more anxiously than graciously.

"Oh! I have not the remotest idea. Twenty-four hours perhaps—three days—four days—a week. We never make

up our minds on these matters till the last moment. For your consolation, Miss Mildmay, my mother does not find this hotel comfortable : so I do not think it will be for long."

"There are other hotels," suggested Ethel.

"Yes, and perhaps we may try one. I think myself — I am afraid — that the place is likely to agree with her, so that we may perhaps be compelled to remain," he said with a smile.

"So you do not like it," she observed.

"Yes, I do, rather. For a little while it would amuse me. After that, no doubt it would bore me. But it is of you I am thinking, not of myself."

"Oh! pray don't think of me. I am quite well able to manage my own affairs," said Miss Mildmay, kindling.

Mr. O'Neil laughed. "You are rather to be pitied certainly," he said ; "and I am very sorry for you."

"Why are you sorry ? I don't understand. I — I tell you that I am quite well able to take care of myself and my friends!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot pettishly.

"But are they your friends really ?" inquired Mr. O'Neil rather gravely.

"You mean Count O'Neil and his mother ? Yes, certainly they are ; and I am not one to throw over my old friends for the sake of —"

"New ones ?" he suggested. "There you are quite right. Nobody could find fault with that sentiment."

"Papa does," said Ethel in a melancholy tone.

"But are they such very old friends ? How long do you know them ?" inquired Mr. O'Neil, after a pause.

"Oh ! about three weeks. It is not the time exactly. People ought not to measure friendship by time. I like them, that is all ; and nothing will make me believe that Madame O'Neil is an impostor," she said warmly, perceiving that her companion was suppressing a smile.

"I don't want you to believe it," he said rather coldly. "Everybody is at liberty to hold his own opinions. It is an open question."

"Yes ; but why — why did you invent such a cruel story ? Surely all the property in the world is not worth believing such a horrible thing as that ?" And Ethel looked quite desperate and earnest.

"Miss Mildmay," then he half laughed, "where is the use of discussing the question ? Even if I chose to persuade you, I might perhaps not be able to succeed. But I do not choose. Much as I would like to

have you on our side, I prefer not to be the one to gain you over. Illusions — even foolish ones — are dangerous things to dispel. Cobwebs of distrust generally hang about the hand that does the nasty work. Hear every thing, and judge for yourself. I don't ask any thing more."

Ethel shook her head. Though she hardly knew it, she was a little piqued at Mr. O'Neil's apparent indifference to her opinion. Still there was an earnestness in his manner which mollified her in spite of herself.

"I don't understand it all," she said. "Of course, I don't know the ins and outs of the question yet ; but — could you not divide the property, and be friends ?" she exclaimed suddenly and with a delighted air.

"Certainly not !" he replied shortly ; though he laughed.

"I am sure Count O'Neil would agree," went on Ethel eagerly.

"That is to say he might if I —

"If you asked him. Well, very likely he would ; but —"

"Arthur, Arthur !" called out Mrs. O'Neil's voice at this moment. "Come here ! I want you. Bring the child in. What on earth have you two been doing out there in the cold for the last half-hour ? There, shut the window. Both Henry and I are shivering and shaking with that dreadful draught."

They obeyed her, and came in. Half an hour and more had indeed sped away, working a change which struck both Ethel and Mr. O'Neil at once, in the two they had left. Mrs. O'Neil's pink-and-white complexion had faded. She looked twenty years older than before. It was as if she had got a sudden and painful shock. Traces of tears were on her cheeks, and were dimming her soft, tender eyes. Even her erect little figure seemed to have bent beneath the blow. And Col. Mildmay, too, was paler than usual, though he was smiling, and sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"Arthur," began Mrs. O'Neil, as her son approached. Then she looked at the colonel, and stopped.

"O'Neil," he said pleasantly, "your mother and I have been making a little arrangement ; and now we only want you and Ethel to agree to it. You rather ; for Ethel will of course be delighted. This hotel is uncomfortable. Why worry yourselves trying another when we have rooms without end to spare at the villa ? Ethel and I are quite lost and lonely in it all by ourselves. Come and stop with us for a little, and you will oblige me more than I can say."

The request was, after all, a simple one, and made simply; but Col. Mildmay spoke with an eagerness that gave it significance, and checked the ready refusal which rose to Mr. O'Neil's lips.

There was an awkward silence, which Mrs. O'Neil broke at last.

"I have promised already. I mean to go," she said, nodding her head with decision: "so, Arthur, you may as well say yes at once."

"But," — and then there followed a string of objections, — "but I did not think you meant to remain at Nice. How do you know it will agree with you, mother?"

"Oh! as to that, most places agree with me if I like them," answered Mrs. O'Neil naïvely.

"Yes; but how do you know you will like it? And are we not very comfortable here? And why should we intrude? And" —

"Oh, don't bother!" said Mrs. O'Neil: "I have made up my mind."

"O'Neil — to oblige me," said Col. Mildmay imploringly.

Mr. O'Neil looked from one to the other, fairly puzzled and perplexed.

"Well, we will think about it and let you know," he said at last.

"Yes. But meanwhile I have made up my mind, you know, Henry," with a nod at the colonel.

Ethel had been standing by in mute, and it must be confessed indignant, amazement, during this animated little discussion. She had been ignored. Nobody thought of her. Mr. O'Neil was the first to remember, or at least to notice, her presence.

"But," he said, "Miss Mildmay may not — Mother, you forget to hear what Miss Mildmay says."

"It is not the least matter what she says," was Mrs. O'Neil's curt rejoinder.

Ethel's eyes opened wide, and her lip curled ominously. But her father interposed, stretching out his hand and drawing her towards him.

"Ethel is too hospitable not to wish exactly as I wish," he said gently.

The girl's face betrayed a sharp struggle between anger and amiability; but fortunately the good angel prevailed. A sunshiny smile broke suddenly through her cloudy eyes, and she bent down and gave her father a hasty kiss.

Tears were trickling down old Mrs. O'Neil's cheeks again, and she bobbed her head approvingly. "Good girl, good girl!" she murmured; and even her son looked interested and pleased over the odd little scene. Then, without further conver-

sation, the colonel and his daughter went away. Explanations were imperatively needed; and explanations could only be given in private.

"Remember, you have promised," were the colonel's parting words. And Mrs. O'Neil, wringing his hands with all her might, said, "Yes, she had; and that she meant to keep her promise too."

A few minutes later her son, having seen the Mildmays to their carriage, returned in all haste to the drawing room.

"Mother, what in the world are you up to?" he began indignantly. But the little woman was in his arms, sobbing as though her heart would break.

"O Arthur! it is dreadful, terrible!" she gasped. "Poor, poor fellow! Poor, poor child!"

"What is it? What on earth is it? Mother" —

"O Arthur! don't you see? Don't you know? Where are your eyes? Oh, what dunderheads men are, to be sure! Arthur, the poor boy is dying, — dying as fast as ever he can die. He knows it; he told me so. The doctors have given him a few weeks at most, it may be less. He says himself that it will be less. Oh, good God! How dreadful it all is!" And the kind old lady's tears nearly choked her.

Her son was thunderstruck and silent.

"Providence has sent us here," went on Mrs. O'Neil after a pause. "It is as clear as noonday. Oh, just think, Arthur, of the poor fellow dying in a foreign country without a friend near him! And that poor girl! — to be left without a soul to comfort her; but I will comfort her. I will be a mother to her. I have given Henry my solemn word that I will. He said that he could die happy now, — now that he knows that I am at hand. Oh, poor fellow, poor fellow!"

"But" — But objections died away upon her son's lips. And Mrs. O'Neil, thoroughly overcome, lay down on the sofa, and cried herself to sleep.



CHAPTER IX.

THE next day the O'Neils, luggage and all, arrived at the villa; that is to say, old Mrs. O'Neil did; for her son was obstinate, and refused to quit his quarters at the hotel.

"I shall go up and see you every day," he promised his mother. "It will be just

as if I were staying there. But I do not choose to give up my liberty, and to bind myself to hours. Above all, I do not choose to intrude."

"Intrude! Fiddlesticks!" interrupted his mother curtly.

"But it is intruding. His daughter"— "I don't care a straw about his daughter. Is it not for her sake that I am doing it? The case is a desperate one, poor dear child!"

"But she does not know. She suspects nothing."

"No. God is merciful to the young, and blinds them to sights which break other people's hearts. And Heaven help me! How shall I ever be able to break it to her?"

"Do not; there is time enough. She will guess it herself perhaps. She ought to be happy so long as she can."

A sentiment in which Mrs. O'Neil entirely coincided. "After all, it may be longer than we think, perhaps," she said, with an attempt at hopefulness. "O Arthur! if you had heard poor Henry yesterday, when he was telling me about it all, it would have given you a pain at your heart. So serene! so courageous! so simple! His one sorrow was for the child. And to think that she has fallen into those dreadful people's hands! That she knows them!" cried Mrs. O'Neil, crimsoning suddenly.

"Ahem! It is unfortunate, certainly." And Mr. O'Neil half smiled.

"Unfortunate! I should think it is. It is nothing short of awful. I would not remain half a day in the same town with them if I could help it,—if I could be cruel enough to refuse poor Henry's dying prayer. But, please God, I shall never lay my eyes upon them. If I did, I don't think I could hold my tongue. Arthur, do you think it possible that they would presume to come near the child so long as I am with her?"

Arthur laughed, and said he did not think such presumption was possible. "Your cards will be difficult to play, though," he added. "They are Miss Mildmay's friends; and she is a girl of determination,—temper even, I might say. Mother, as I told you a hundred times last night, you are undertaking more than you think. What is to happen when—if?"

"Oh, don't speak of it, don't!" cried Mrs. O'Neil, putting her hands to her ears. "I can't bear to think of it, to hear of it. God will help us. He knows that it is out of kindness I am acting. I could not refuse poor Henry, for the sake of his love for Nora, if for nothing else. Arthur, you know that I could not."

O'Neil was silent. Indeed, his mother, running out of the room to make her final preparations, gave him no opportunity of replying; but, even if he could, he would not have spoken. All his arguments had been exhausted last night, and perhaps overruled. Two hours had he and his mother spent discussing the affair; and the end of it was that Mrs. O'Neil, at least, was as positive in her opinion, when the conversation was over, as when it had begun.

And, after all, how could he seriously oppose himself to the dictates of her warm, generous heart? The case was, as she had said, a desperate one. Col. Mildmay was an old, old friend. Time and separation had, it is true, made him a stranger; but some of the dearest memories of the past were clinging round him, and binding him to them. And now, fast dying as he was, he had thrown himself, as it were, on their mercy. How was it possible to refuse such a prayer? He had no near relations,—none at least who were available now. With his dead wife's family he had long ceased to hold intercourse; and his only brother, who would at his death be Ethel's natural guardian, had been for years with his regiment in India, and was, of course, useless.

It seemed, indeed, really as though Providence had brought his mother here at this precise moment, when, dying in a foreign country and in the midst of strangers, poor Col. Mildmay had with despair been contemplating his young daughter's lonely, unprotected position when he should have left her. As Mrs. O'Neil had asked, how could she possibly refuse to be a mother to the girl so long as she needed a mother? How could she pass on her way like the priest or the Levite, and turn a cold, deaf ear to this poor man's entreaty that she would delay a little while, just so long as it would take him to die, in order that he might have the comfort of knowing that his child would have one friend, at least, whom he could trust to help her through her hour of darkness and grief? Whether she could or not, at all events one thing was certain,—she would not. Mrs. O'Neil's heart, she often said, was too much for her: once that was touched, no undertaking was too heavy, no sacrifice too great. Her heart was touched now; and from this final court her son well knew there was no appeal. And so after, for form's sake, a certain amount of opposition, he resigned himself to circumstances, and made the best of them.

The very next day the old lady proved herself true to her word, and took up her

abode at the villa. To please her son, she had, meanwhile, made an attempt to pacify the colonel with a promise to remain at Nice, but accompanied with a prayer to be excused residing in his house.

"It is a sick man's fancy," Mr. O'Neil had urged. "You will put them all out, and give trouble. Besides, you will be more comfortable in your own *pied à terre*."

"Not at all. The villa is sheltered from these abominable winds, and one is never comfortable in a hotel," Mrs. O'Neil had replied; then she added,—

"There is another reason, too, Arthur. Up there I shall be more out of the way of those *dreadful* people, you know. Imagine seeing them pass by on the Promenade, perhaps several times a day! It would kill me, you know it would!"

Nevertheless, Mr. O'Neil had insisted, and the note of excuse to the colonel had been despatched; but it had been answered by the colonel in person, so disappointed, so put out, so worried and depressed, that there was no resisting or refusing any longer.

It was, to say the least of it, a peculiar "situation." But, like many another peculiar situation, people somehow fitted themselves into it with a greater amount of ease and philosophy than might have been expected. Ethel for one, after the first, submitted to it with tolerable grace and equanimity. Curiosity helped her through. The oddity of the whole arrangement tickled her fancy. Youth can, in general, accommodate itself to any thing better than dulness or flatness; and certainly there was nothing either dull or flat about Mrs. O'Neil or her visit. On the contrary, the gay, vivacious little woman enlivened the whole house; and, since her father's extraordinary caprice (as she considered it) had to be humored, Ethel by no means found the humoring of it so totally unpleasant, and, indeed, was rather pleasurable excited by it than otherwise. Of course, she would not of her own will have committed the treason of allowing Mrs. O'Neil to pass the threshold of the house; but as the crime was unavoidable, and, moreover, none of her doing, there was something perhaps pleasantly exhilarating in thus being brought to close quarters with the enemy's camp, and in being put upon her mettle for the defence of her friends. Poor Col. Mildmay! His clear stratagem was destined to work exactly in the wrong direction. As to Ethel, she chose to accept it as a signal of war, and to persuade herself that she was at full liberty to take her own measures to defeat

it; and the necessities of the case required that these measures should be secret ones, so long as Mrs. O'Neil's politeness and courtesy would not, of course, admit of open battle. So far, the colonel had manœuvred well. But what could not be done in public might be done in private; and Ethel was resolved not to be cheated or "done" out of her friends. Her father was not behaving openly by her; and why should she behave openly by him? She would not willingly deceive him; for she hated and scorned deception: but, if he himself put such weapons into her hand, what could she do but make use of them?

And thus it was that a great and cruel mistake was made, and that good motives were misconstrued and good intentions defeated, and that a horrid shadow crept in between father and daughter, and that Miss Mildmay, with a proud, sore heart, said to herself that she was being badly treated, and had, therefore, earned the right to treat others badly in return.

Externally, however, things wore a cheerful aspect. The colonel was better, — decidedly better. Perhaps it was the weather, — weather so soft and bright; and, better, such a wealth of luxuriant spring, that it seemed as though it must renew life, and keep disease and death at bay.

He said himself, however, that it was not the weather, but ease of mind, which made him better, — ease of mind, which, as he gratefully assured Mrs. O'Neil, he owed to her. "Not that I am better really," he added with one of his quick, painful sighs: "it is, after all, merely a question of time."

Whereupon the kind old lady told him not to talk nonsense, and stoutly asserted that he only needed Dr. O'Toole's care and the Atlantic breeze to make him as sound and as strong as ever.

"Wait till you are a couple of months with us at 'Mount Druid,'" she said cheerfully: "you will not know yourself at the end of them."

"If I were ever able to get there," replied the colonel, shaking his head; "if I were only able to leave this place! But it is not warm enough to think of turning homewards yet, even if I could travel. I wish to Heaven that we could leave Nice," he added earnestly.

"So you can in a couple of weeks. This sun will bake us through and through in no time, never fear. You mean on account of those odious people?" she inquired, drawing herself up.

"Yes: on account of them. It may be awkward and unpleasant for Ethel."

"They will not trouble her much so long

as I am with her, I fancy," said Mrs. O'Neil in a flutter.

"No; I suppose not: but have you had any talk with Ethel on the subject?" he inquired uneasily.

"Not a word. It is a subject which makes me ill," she added in a tone of profound disgust.

"I am half afraid that she has a fancy for the young man," said the colonel after a little pause.

"Fancy for him! Fancy for Denis Irwin's son! Colonel, are you mad?" exclaimed Mrs. O'Neil excitedly.

"Of course it is nothing; a girl's freak. She believes him to be Madame O'Neil's son, and a count into the bargain, you know," he said with a half-smile.

"My goodness, my goodness! What a man you are, colonel, to have charge of a girl!" cried the old lady, holding up her hands: "how on earth did you fall into such a trap?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," he replied dolefully. "I suppose I was a fool. But, after all, all the world believes it too, Mrs. O'Neil, you know, with the exception of yourself and Arthur and Dr. O'Toole, and — and me of course," he added hastily, detecting an ominous flash in Mrs. O'Neil's bright eyes.

He regretted the words the next moment, half jokingly spoken as they had been; for it was easy to see that they had pained the old lady.

"It is true enough, true enough," she said with a groan. "They have got every thing on their side but right. Every thing!" she repeated despairingly. "Arthur will be wronged, and the lands of the O'Neils will pass to strangers, and — oh, my God! My God, you will never permit it! Surely you will, in your justice, never permit it!"

She covered her face with her hands, quite overcome. Col. Mildmay was aghast at this sudden and unexpected display of emotion, and began to murmur words of consolation.

But Mrs. O'Neil recovered her self-possession as quickly as she had lost it.

"What an old idiot I am, to be sure!" she exclaimed, looking up, and smiling through her tears; "a thorough old idiot! As I say twenty times a day to myself, 'All is not lost yet;' and, until it has actually become a fact, I never will believe, that, if justice still exists on earth, such an iniquity will be countenanced. At all events, I am resolved that we will fight the battle to the last." Mrs. O'Neil concluded with a determined nod and kindling eyes. "God

will spare me, I know he will, to fight it out."

She was a brave old lady; and so the colonel, with smiling admiration, told her. But he was thinking more of his daughter than of the O'Neils' great family feud.

"I wish I could be sure that Ethel has not a hankering for that young fellow," he observed, musing aloud, and in anxious tones.

Mrs. O'Neil said nothing; but she took the hint which the colonel meant to convey to her. Doing things by halves was not in her line; and, having obliged the colonel by coming to stay with him, she was also willing to oblige him by assisting his daughter out of the scrape in which he had allowed her to entangle herself. So upon the next opportunity, which was an hour or two later, she made up her mind, animated perhaps by a little curiosity as well as benevolence, to approach the odious subject. But it was a little difficult. Ethel was prudent, and upon her guard. In vain did Mrs. O'Neil inquire the names of her friends and acquaintances, and with kindly sympathy attempt to elicit confidences on the delicate topic of partners and admirers. The young girl, generally so talkative and communicative, was now reserved and cautious, and totally uninteresting.

Whereupon Mrs. O'Neil very quickly lost patience, and abandoned the tortuous ways.

"There is no use hiding it from me," she exclaimed abruptly in the midst of a dreary pause; "not the least. You know those dreadful people, Ethel: I know you do. Of course you do not like them: nobody could. But how can you bear even to know them?" she inquired pathetically.

Miss Mildmay looked a little confused.

"What people?" she asked, to gain time: then she added hastily, "You mean your relations, — Madame O'Neil and her son Count O'Neil? Yes, I do know them."

"Her son! Count! Pshaw! Don't be a goose, child, — don't be a goose! He is no more a count than you are a countess; and his name is not O'Neil, but Irwin; and he is not that woman's child, but her sister's, — wife to Denis Irwin, the steward at Castle Garvagh. There! you know all about it now." And the old lady looked delighted, as though she had got rid of a disagreeable job.

But Ethel smiled scornfully.

"I may know it; but I certainly do not believe it," she said shortly.

"Bless me! Do you suppose that I am telling lies, then?" demanded Mrs. O'Neil aghast.

"Oh, no! you are prejudiced, mistaken. It is easy to be credulous where our interests are concerned," she added in a low voice.

Which, however, did not escape the old lady's quick ears. "Upon my word, considering your years, you are outspoken enough, my dear," she said sharply, though she laughed.

"I beg your pardon. I am sorry; but they are my friends," said Ethel with tremulous dignity.

"Your friends, child!—your friends! O Ethel! whatever you are, don't be silly," she said imploringly.

"Being told one is silly does not convince one," observed Miss Mildmay shortly.

There was a pause. Both ladies were recovering breath after this preliminary skirmish; both were sharpening their weapons for the fray which now seemed imminent. Ethel was young and rash, and, now that she was excited, had lost her self-restraint, and forgotten her prudence. She was the first to rush to the attack.

"Yes!" she cried warmly, "it is easy to assert, but not so easy to convince. Anybody can tell a story; but everybody can't prove it. Can you prove your story, Mrs. O'Neil? Will you be able to prove it when it comes to the test? Until you have done so, it seems to me hard to expect us to take for granted that Madame O'Neil and her son are adventurers and impostors."

Mrs. O'Neil listened to this impassioned harangue with great calmness.

"Ha, ha!" she laughed when it had come to an end. "It is not difficult to perceive that the lady's maid has been priming you well."

"What do you mean?" inquired Ethel, turning a little pale.

"Oh! so she did not inform you of that little fact? Yes, my dear, the lady who is at present my daughter-in-law used, in the good old times, to be my maid. Ernestine Duroc was her name; and a very clever maid she was too, to do her justice,—too clever by half. God forgive her!" concluded the old lady, wringing her hands.

Ethel was, no doubt about it, a little shocked; but she would not have betrayed it for all the world. "She married your son!" she observed in a hard, constrained tone.

"Don't I know she did? don't I know it to my cost? Did she not repay my goodness and kindness by ingratitude and the blackest deceit? Do you know the story, or do you not?" she demanded sharply.

"Not all!—only vaguely: please tell me," said Ethel, whose curiosity was getting the better of her pride.

"Well, I will, child,—I will; I must, I suppose, to prevent you making a fool of yourself; though, if I were to listen to my conscience, I would not go within a mile of the hateful subject, which is altogether too much for my charity and forgiveness. Well, the woman was my maid. I took a fancy to her handsome face on an unlucky foreign tour I was making. They (she and her sister) got round me with a sad story of distress and misery; and I was younger than I am now, and I believed them. They were twins, and devoted to one another, so they said; and I was good-natured and credulous and rich. The end of it was, child, that I brought them both back with me to Ireland,—Ernestine as my maid, Marianne as—well, I don't know as what,—as Ernestine's companion, I suppose;" and the old lady made a rueful, half-comical grimace. "They were clever young women,—at least, Ernestine was; Marianne I always thought a poor creature,—and they did not allow the grass to grow under their feet. How they took me in, and threw dust in my eyes, and deceived me, is more than I can say; but do it they did, and to a purpose. In six months the mischief was done: Bernard, poor foolish boy I had been entrapped and wheedled and married—married!—the heir of the O'Neils married to his mother's waiting-maid!"

"How dreadful!" escaped involuntarily from Ethel.

"Ay, child, dreadful indeed! Of course, I nearly died of it, but not quite. One dies of nothing so long as one can help. Poor Bernard could not help dying before long. He caught a fever in Rome; and there, far away from me, unforgiven and estranged (for I knew nothing of his illness), my boy—my eldest-born—died. O child! that was suffering worse than all. For that I never can forgive that woman,—that cruel, wicked woman. Oh! I would have flown to him; I would have taken him in my arms; I would have pardoned him all, every thing! I would have received his last breath; he would have died with his mother's blessing. But as it was, I was thinking of him in anger and coldness and contempt and resentfulness; and—O child! he was dead,—dead!"

There was a silence. Ethel did not know it; but her eyes were filled with tears. "He knew that you would have gone to him if you could—there was not time perhaps," she said gently, after a little.

"Perhaps not : his wife said there was not. But how can I forgive her being there, and I, his mother, away ? O child, child ! may you never be a mother, if your heart is to be torn as mine was then !"

Ethel looked at her wonderingly. Who would ever have thought that this frail little woman could have gone through so much ? that these soft bright eyes could have shed so many and such bitter tears ? that this erect, slender figure could have borne such a heavy, galling burden ?

"I am sorry for you," the young girl said simply and warmly.

"I dare say you are, child ; I dare say you are : you would be made of stone if you were not. But listen to the end of the story : the sad part is over now, and the wicked part begins. Bernard's wife had a child a few months after his death. There was no denying the fact : Dr. O'Toole himself attended her. It was the only quarrel we ever had in our lives, and I did quarrel with him then. I was angry with him for going to her. I believe I was wrong. At all events, it all turned out for the best. A son and heir to the O'Neils was born : I went to see it myself when the mother was asleep, — I did, indeed, — for the life of me I could not help it ; and a fine and splendid baby it was, — a true O'Neil, with Bernard's own eyes and smile and hair. I kissed him, poor little fellow, and blessed him for his dead father's sake. Still I could not forgive her yet. I could not take the mother and child home with me, — it was too soon, — I meant to do it perhaps later on. I could never have allowed my grandchild to grow up a stranger to me. Oh ! if I had only done it at once ; then, if I had had the courage, the generosity, to conquer myself, what happened afterwards could never have happened ; and I have often thought since that God sent it to me as a punishment for having resisted his grace. The child died of convulsions ; but they managed cleverly, and no suspicions were raised. It was not a difficult matter. Bernard's wife was staying with her sister, who had been a year ago married to Irwin, Lord O'Neil's steward, and whose baby had been born a little while before Ernestine's. One of these children died and was buried. They say it was Irwin's child. We say it was Bernard's. God knows the truth."

"But what made you suspect such a horrible fraud ?" asked Ethel eagerly.

"We did not suspect it at first, nor for some months afterwards. Dr. O'Toole had been called in to attend Bernard's child. Ernestine herself had sent for him, but,

unfortunately, he was away ; and when, in three days, he returned, he was told that Bernard's infant had recovered, but that his little cousin was dead. On that occasion he saw neither child, and suspected nothing ; and it was not till three months had passed, that a rumor reached him, nobody knows how, that some deceit had been practised. I was too ill at the time of the child's death to know or to care about anything ; and I had left Ireland shortly afterwards for change of scene and air. While I was away, Dr. O'Toole wrote to me of the vague rumor which had been spread about the country, but warned me that it was only vague ; that he could get hold of nothing clear or definite. He had been to see the child which was still living, and had found Madame O'Neil, as she styled herself, on the point of leaving Castle Garvagh, and going to live in France. As to the child, what could he say ? It was like every other baby of a few months old ; and, whether it was the baby which he had helped to bring into the world or not, poor Dr. O'Toole, with the best will in the world, was incapable of deciding. There was no birth-mark, no sign, by which he could identify it. I hurried back, but, too late : they were gone. I went after them ; but it was a year before I succeeded in finding them. She was afraid to conceal the child from me. I saw it. My instinct, my heart, told me that it was not Bernard's child, — not the little one that I had kissed and fondled when it was a week old ; but I had no proof, and in common justice I was compelled to distrust my own feelings and suspicions, and to return home as wise as when I had left. For some years, nothing more happened. The suspicion remained alive ; all sorts of strange stories were circulated in the country ; and the wild people in the midst of whom we lived, and who have for centuries known and loved the O'Neils, took part with us against the foreigners, and always asserted that Arthur was Lord O'Neil's rightful heir. Time passed. Dr. O'Toole and I were growing old ; but we kept our eyes and ears open nevertheless. There was a servant-girl of Denis Irwin's, a wild, bad girl, who had been in his service at the time of the children's birth. The Irwins and she were always quarrelling, and at last they sent her about her business ; that is to say, they got her a husband somehow, though her character was none of the best, and shipped her off to America, with her pockets well filled. It was a queer business, and set people talking. They said in the country that Bridget knew more than her prayers, and that

the Irwins' were afraid of her. But this, like every thing else, was only talk. Dr. O'Toole had over and over again tried to sound Bridget, but had got nothing out of her; though the girl's ways and manners betrayed more than she chose to tell. Well, off she went to America; but even there we managed to keep our eyes on her still, and never quite lost sight of her. Something was always telling me that Bridget would serve us one day; though how, Heaven only knew. Well, child! she has served us, or rather she will serve!"—

Mrs. O'Neil broke off suddenly. "Child, what I am telling you now is only between you and me," she said, giving the girl a quick, startled glance. "Of course, you will not tattle, or repeat, or"—

Ethel flushed up. "I suppose that I have honor enough to keep a secret?" she said in her most dignified tone.

"And it is a secret, a *dear* secret," proceeded Mrs. O'Neil, lowering her voice, and giving a cautious look around. "Arthur would never forgive me if he thought that I *so* much as breathed a word of it to you!"—

"Then don't, Mrs. O'Neil," interrupted Ethel shortly, with a mighty effort, gulping down her curiosity.

"It is my duty to tell you, child: it is my duty to do every thing I can to prevent your being made a fool of—a silly, ridiculous fool—by that bad, scheming, clever woman. Not that there is so much to tell as yet; though, please God, one day there will be." The old lady went on shaking her head, and looking unutterably mysterious. "But Bridget is ill now, dying, I believe,—dying by inches,—of some terrible, cruel disease; and God is just, and will not,—no, he *can* not, allow the poor, wretched creature to die with the secret which, we *know*, we are morally certain, is on her conscience unconfessed."

"You know, you are certain,—are you really certain, Mrs. O'Neil?"

The old lady's pink cheeks flushed, and her voice faltered. "Yes, child, I *am*; and I am certain, too, that God is good, and that he will not break my heart. But it is weary, weary work to wait, and I am old, and—oh, my God!—who knows but that the end may come when I am no longer there to see it?" And little Mrs. O'Neil broke down all at once, and burst into tears.

Ethel was a traitress. She kissed her,—took her in her arms, and kissed her tears away. But a great perplexing pain was in her heart, and clouds dimmed her sweet violet eyes as they gazed absently out into the sunlit garden.

And then an interruption came; and perhaps both ladies were glad, that, for the present, further confidences were impossible.

CHAPTER X.

SOMETIMES time seems to stand still, sometimes to rush in a violent hurry. It is hard to say which of these operations suits us best or worst. We get impatient of its slowness; but we get frightened of its speed. On the whole, however, impatience is a lesser evil than fear; and, if we were wise, we would always select the slow mode of progression rather than the fast.

Ethel for once was wise to-day, and was sorry that time seemed to be going at railroad speed, and bringing her face to face with difficulties, which, when it came to the point, she would rather have deferred a little longer. Luncheon was just over at the villa. The heat was making everybody drowsy and lazy; and even the flies were buzzing languidly. Within doors, all was quietness and darkness and sleepiness; but without, the world was blazing away pitilessly, and the white houses and white streets and white roads of Nice were all glaring painfully beneath the brazen mid-day sun.

Ethel was dressing herself to go out, notwithstanding,—and, for the first time in her life, to go out to keep a secret appointment. More than a week had passed, and she had not met Count O'Neil. The gay, happy carnival was over, and gloomy, austere Lent had begun. Balls and parties were at an end. There had been no excuses for chance and unpremeditated meetings. Ethel's time had been taken up, and her movements controlled; and it had been impossible for her to join Madame O'Neil in the gardens or on the Promenade in the peasant old fashion, or to go to see her at an hour when she would be likely to find her at home: in short, Col. Mildmay's manœuvre had succeeded admirably; and, without a word or a single overt act, he had all at once put an end to the undesirable intercourse.

The girl would not have cared, or perhaps have even noticed, the change, except for one reason. She liked Mrs. O'Neil. The old lady diverted and amused her, and helped to make the long evenings short. She enjoyed doing the honors of the house to her, and winning her heart by looking after her comforts and the careful exclusion of draughts. Mrs. O'Neil's vivacity had

cleared the atmosphere of *ennui*, and Arthur O'Neil's daily visits were rather pleasant breaks than otherwise. Her father was more cheerful, and better than he had been for a long time. In fact, there was only one drawback to it all; and that was an important one, a very important one, Ethel gravely decided: she could not see her admirer or lover or—whatever he was. On that latter point she had not yet quite made up her mind; but on the former, viz., the necessity of seeing him, she had no doubt in the world.

But how was it to be done? More than once the angry question had risen to her lips, and she had almost made it to her father; but something had always checked her. She knew very well what his answer would be: at least, she knew that it certainly would not be one according to her wishes. Perhaps it would be a peremptory command, or perhaps—and this was the best she could hope for—it would be an entreaty that she would be guided by him, and break off the acquaintanceship to which he objected; and in anticipation she shrank from wilfully disregarding either. Therefore Ethel listened to prudence, and was silent. Speech would certainly not make matters better, and might easily make them worse. So long as wishes were only implied, they might with a tolerably safe conscience be evaded. After all, she was only defending herself with the same arms which were being used against her; and why should she scruple to do so? But she did scruple it, nevertheless, and was miserable.

There are, however, a hundred ways of being miserable; and Ethel was miserable after an excited, not thoroughly depressing fashion. Young girls of eighteen or nineteen are not often made utterly and hopelessly miserable by receiving letters from handsome and fascinating young men, in which they are informed that these same young men are dying of love for them, and will soon be altogether dead if some kindness be not shown to them. Some such letter had Ethel received from Count O'Neil that morning. The young man wrote ardently and eloquently, even reproachfully. Days had gone by, and he had not seen her. He had watched and waited for her at home, in public places, everywhere; but in vain. She had not come; she was avoiding him; she was allowing herself to be prejudiced by slanderous stories, which he called Heaven to witness were false. At the first ill-natured breath which reached her ears, she was faltering. "What was her friendship worth," he asked, "if she was ready to believe every thing that his enemies chose to

say against him; if she was ready, without an effort at resistance, to sacrifice him, to make him miserable, to drive him to despair?" His mother was too proud to utter a reproach, or to take any step which might embarrass her position, or to attempt to influence her (it was against her will that he was writing thus); but poor devils who love, as the count observed pathetically, are not proud. He was not proud, but only wretched. He loved—and he was not ashamed to confess it—devotedly, madly. She had made him love her with all his heart; and now he would not, could not, believe that the first trial would prove her to have been making a jest of his most sacred feelings.

A wild, passionate composition, which would have taken Col. Mildmay's breath away had he seen it, and was very startling even to the object of its protestations. Ethel's cheeks burned and her heart beat as she read it. It was her first love-letter, and was sufficiently ardent to satisfy the most fastidious taste. Poor fellow! it was evident that he really was desperately in love, and with her,—with her, Ethel Mildmay! Perhaps it had been play up to this, at least on her side; but certainly, after this declaration, it could be so no longer. She had never in her life seen a love-letter before, except in books; and now that here was one addressed to her, actually meant for her, the girl felt dazed and bewildered, and, to tell the truth, a little frightened. What was she to do with it? To keep it, of course. How could such a silly thought as to tear it up and let it fly in the wind have occurred to her? Of course she would keep it, and treasure it, and hide it away in some safe, secret drawer, as all young ladies do with their love-letters. And perhaps another would come,—two or three more; and they would be tied up with a blue ribbon: a faded flower would be put with them; and together they would make a sentimental little bundle, to be found after death, to be wondered over and wept over. Ah, such foolish, foolish thoughts! such silly, silly little bundles! Such absurd scraps of romance! What is the use of them all, dangerous playthings and poisoned sugar-plums to youth as they are, leaving so little behind? Perhaps a contemptuous, incredulous smile which we vouchsafe them in after-years, when our horizons are widened, and we have learned to know what "all that sort of stuff and nonsense" means; perhaps a hard laugh when we have seen our dreams dispelled and our idols demolished; and perhaps a heartache, and a sharp regret which lasts

through a lifetime; little good, indeed, and much harm, as all sensible people must see at a glance.

However, what was to be done with the letter was not the most important question to be considered just at present. What was to be done with the request it contained was really the matter in hand. Ethel did not make up her mind at once; did not make it up — at least she preterfided not — till the last moment; and, when the last moment came, she put on her hat, as we have seen, and went out to meet her lover. No use in going over all the old arguments and reasons with which she excused her conduct to herself; no use in reminding the reader that she was behaving perfectly openly, and without any attempt at concealment, and that it was broad daylight, and that all the world might see her if it only chose to look.

All the world was, as a matter of fact, however, safely out of the way just now, as she could not help remembering with a sensation of relief as she left the house. Her father was in his room. Since the hot weather had come, he always rested for a couple of hours in the middle of the day. Mrs. O'Neil was asleep. She also indulged in repose after luncheon. In short, so long as this burning sun remained high in the heavens, the coast was clear from observers either at home or abroad; and Ethel felt, that, so far as concerned "being seen," she might act with impunity.

And so she went. It was only a little way. Count O'Neil had said that he would wait for her at a little roadside chapel which was but a couple of hundred yards from the gate of the villa, — a picturesque, shady spot, very well suited for a lover's tryst. The young man was true to his word. At Ethel's approach, he rushed to meet her with such grateful, delighted, ardent words and looks, that she stopped short suddenly, and for the first time distinctly realized what she was about.

"I have come to — to" — she began when he paused at last, and gave her a chance of uttering a word. "Count O'Neil, this is very wrong: you know it is. You should not have asked me to do it!" she burst out then, half crying, half laughing.

"Wrong or right, it is remarkably pleasant," was the young man's reply. "I can never thank you enough. I could remain here in this blessed spot forever, and be happy — with you."

"Nonsense! I am only going to stay five minutes; not an instant more;" and she drew out her tiny watch, and showed it to

him. "See! it is a quarter-past two. At twenty minutes past, I shall say good-by to you. Yes, count — really," as he began an eager protestation.

She laughed; he laughed. Perhaps they both knew what an idle threat it was. They had left the chapel now, and were wandering up a narrow side-path which led into a shady valley carpeted with violets and garlic, and with steep wooded banks on either side. It was a perfect solitude. Nobody would ever have guessed that this verdant, quiet nook was so close to a busy and populous town.

"How beautiful it all is!" Ethel exclaimed, drawing a long breath of enjoyment. And beautiful it was, smiling gladly beneath the strong yet gentle touch of spring — the dark trees and the intense blue sky above; and, beneath, this peaceful, pleasant valley filled with the gay hum of insects and the joyous song of birds, and enamelled with countless wild flowers and tender verdure.

Love, however, is a blasphemer of every thing but itself. O'Neil had no eyes for the beauties of Nature just then. "It is beautiful because you are here," he said.

An assertion which Ethel flatly informed him was silly in the extreme, thus provoking many more equally silly ones. Then followed a quarrel; then a reconciliation. The five minutes had past and gone, and many other five minutes besides, before a single word of common sense had been spoken by either of them.

After all, they were little more than children; and, moreover, they were children in love. It would have been too much to expect them to talk solemnly and seriously under the circumstances. Now that they were together, difficulties seemed to have vanished, or were happily ignored.

When, after a while, O'Neil alluded angrily to his relations, Ethel put her hands to her ears, and begged of him to stop.

"I am sick of the O'Neils and their quarrels," she said with playful petulance; "and I wish all the O'Neils were at the bottom of the sea," she added politely.

"Do you? — then I wish to Heaven that I were not one. On my honor, I am often inclined to desire it," he said with a sudden earnestness. "There are moments when I detest the sound of my own name, and, remembering what a stone of dissension I am, wish that I had never been born. There are moments when I feel, that, if it were not for my mother, I would willingly pitch their money and their name in their faces, renounce my claims and prospects, and prove myself as proud as them-

selves,—too proud to belong to a family whose accursed pride makes them ashamed to own me."

Ethel was thunderstruck, and delighted too. She had never suspected that the young man was capable of such an outburst of genuine and proper feeling, and she looked at him with furtive admiration.

"It is a shame!" she exclaimed indignantly,—"a cruel shame!" But then she remembered old Mrs. O'Neil's piteous tale, and her face of anguish and her tears; and she was racked, and did not know what to say or think.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "if it could only be all pleasantly and amicably arranged!—if you could but divide this dreadful property between you! Could you not manage it?" she inquired eagerly. It was her one remedy,—the single panacea she could devise wherewith to heal the family feuds of the O'Neils.

Count O'Neil received the suggestion in a more amiable spirit than his uncle had done. "I am sure I should be delighted," he said. "I should like nothing better. So far as I am concerned, these famous family lands and estates are—or rather would be—a burden to me. What shall I do with them when I possess them? To live in such a miserable, savage, uncivilized country as Ireland, is, of course, an impossibility. Castle Garvagh may be magnificent,—a palace; but it is situated in the midst of a desert upon which the sun never shines and the rain never ceases to pour. *Peste!* All the magnificence in the world would not make up to me for the loss of a fine climate, society, gayety,—all that makes life tolerable, in short. A week's residence in my 'ancestral halls,' as my mother chooses to call them, would infallibly lead to suicide. To you I may speak freely," he went on confidentially, "and tell every thing. Once, not long ago,—unknown to my mother, of course,—I actually did make a proposal of the sort,—threw out hints, through men of business who interest themselves in the faintly affairs, that I might not be unwilling to listen to an arrangement; that a large income, ready money—in fact you understand."

"Do you mean that for money you were ready to say that you were not the heir?" inquired Ethel, opening her eyes.

"No, no! I only meant that an arrangement might be made, that my uncle might enjoy the property during his life, and that, after his death, I should come in for it. In short, that, for a consideration, I might consent to be his heir,—*his* son, as it were.

Now, would not that have been a delightful way of pleasing everybody?" he inquired naïvely. "Poor fellow! It is impossible not to acknowledge that my birth was a terrible disappointment to him," observed Count O'Neil compassionately.

"But Mr. O'Neil may wish to marry," suggested Ethel, after a pause of reflection.

"To marry! Why should he wish to marry?" and he gave her a quick, keen glance.

"I don't know, I am sure. People do sometimes," replied Ethel innocently.

Count O'Neil looked re-assured. "My mother thinks he will never marry," he said; "and I believe that he himself says he will not, until the day comes when he knows that his son will be heir to Castle Garvagh. My constitution is excellent, and, for the present, I see no signs of being able to accommodate him," went on O'Neil with a laugh: "so the poor creature is condemned to celibacy. My word of honor, I pity him from the bottom of my heart: I really do." And the young man twirled his mustache complacently. "He is letting the precious moments pass,—has let them pass, indeed. My uncle is no longer in his first youth; and I, I am robuster and stronger than ever I was, unfortunately. When that old imbecile, who is, without scruple, keeping us all waiting on him such an infernal time, dies at last, I shall be there, never fear, to take my father's place."

"So Mr. O'Neil refused to listen to your delightful proposition; did he?" inquired Ethel, with some irony in her voice, when he paused.

"Of course, he did,—refused with scorn, impudent scorn," replied the young man reddening. "It was reported to me that he declared that he would make no condition with the son of—ah! why should I repeat the insulting words? Why should I pollute your pure ears with that infamous, slanderous tale with which, doubtless, others less scrupulous than I am, have already poisoned them? Ah! it is their accursed pride which is at the bottom of it all. They cannot forget or forgive the fact that one of them made a *mésalliance*; that my mother—I am not ashamed to say it—was of humble birth and poor, and that yet she is one of themselves,—their near relative. Where they have sinned, they have been punished. They have sinned through pride. They are proud of their blue blood, and of their ancient descent—royal, as they call it—from the kings of Ireland, forsooth!" And the young man laughed satirically, and shrugged his shoulders. "I, it is true, am not descended from kings.

My grandfather kept a shop in the Rue St. Antoine. His father before him probably sold cheap drinks on the Boulevard. My mother earned her bread in service; yet I am head of the family, and heir of the O'Neils, kings as they were. It is a just retribution; but they cannot accept it. It is a bitter, bitter pill, and, rather than swallow it, they have recourse to falsehood and calumny. They have hesitated, stopped, at nothing."

"But — but — perhaps they are deceived. You surely do not suppose that they are intentionally — that, in short, Mr. O'Neil wishes to rob you of what he knows to be rightfully yours? I cannot believe it," said Ethel in a tone of pain.

"Why not? Other men have done as much. There is intentional wrong somewhere. Is he guilty of it, or am I?" And O'Neil stopped short in his walk, crossed his hands on his breast, and looked at her as though he meant to get an answer.

Ethel wrung her hands. It was the ever recurring *cul-de-sac*, — whom to believe, and whom not to believe: where to find the truth, where to detect falsehood.

"I don't know. How should I know?" she began petulantly. And then, as O'Neil's brows contracted, and his handsome eyes flashed, "Of course, I know that whatever you say is true," she went on with hasty eagerness. "Of course, I believe you: I trust you *jusqu'aux bouts des doigts*. But don't look at me with such a terrible expression. You frighten me; you do indeed," she said, pouting. "What have I said? What have I done? You look exactly like the wolf who is going to eat up poor little Red Riding Hood. Ah, me! How unfortunate I am between you all!"

No doubt about it, if Ethel was somewhat to be pitied in the midst of so many conflicting interests and sympathies, she was not totally inexpert in the art of getting nimbly out of difficulties. O'Neil was reduced to abject contrition at once.

"Do I frighten you? What a brute I am! and what an angel you are!" he exclaimed. "Do I frighten you? — I, who would give worlds, did I possess them, to save you an hour's grief. I am a fool; I know I am; but I cannot help it. I love you to distraction; and it is a torture to me to know that these wretched family differences have raised a barrier between us, — the barrier of your father's mistrust and dislike. It is a torture to me to know that while, for the present at least, I am denied the *entrée* to your home, other men enjoy it freely; and that, while I can only snatch a rare short hour of your society, others may

see you when and where they please. It is a torture" —

"But," interposed Ethel with a demure smile, "nobody sees me. This last week we have received scarcely a single visitor, except the poor old baron. Surely you are not jealous of him, count?"

"I am capable of any thing, I believe. But it is not to the baron that I allude. I am alluding to my uncle, who does not allow a single day to pass without finding his way to the villa, — to my uncle, who has it in his power, and whose interest it is, to poison your mind against me."

"He never speaks of you," put in Ethel simply. "Besides, he comes to see his mother, not me, count. And, besides — oh, dear me! how funny it is for a man to be jealous of his own uncle!"

And Miss Mildmay laughed a merry, provoking laugh.

"Remarkably funny! — very amusing, no doubt!" said O'Neil grimly. "It has come to that, I believe I could be jealous of my great-grandfather, if I happened to own such a relative. No doubt I am an object of ridicule in your eyes, mademoiselle, — a laughing-stock, an idiot. The thing is quite conceivable. Men who love women are always fools for their pains. But I care not. I feel desperate, callous. Laugh away! you cannot make me more miserable than I already am."

Cutting words, which yet did not seem to affect Ethel as deeply as they ought.

"Mr. O'Neil is certainly not in his first youth, as you have just now remarked," she observed demurely, after a thoughtful pause. "He is even gray, very gray. Some persons have a passion for gray hair, though. I knew a young girl once who declared she would never marry a man whose hair was not gray. To tell the truth, I rather like it myself. It looks *distingué*. Don't you agree with me, count?"

A question which made the young man writhe. But luckily his wrath was appeased in time. Ethel's violet eyes were looking at him with soft deprecation from beneath her hat, and she was smiling a smile so sweet and arch, and altogether irresistible, that it fully made up for the malice of her words. O'Neil, at all events, was satisfied, and forgave her coquettish little tricks at once. After all, his jealousy was not as great as his lamentations just now would have made her believe. It troubled him with momentary little attacks, but was very far from chronic. His nature was a sanguine one, and he had full confidence in himself, and never doubted but that Ethel found him charming; and, when a man

rejoices in this pleasant conviction, a woman can, for the most part, do with him as she chooses,—worry him, torment him, get what she likes out of him. Gratified vanity is a more important element of the tender passion than people of the romantic school would like to confess.

O'Neil was a vain man, and his vanity was flattered now. Ethel might discharge her quiverful of arrows at him with perfect impunity. He wore a coat of mail of her own manufacture, from which they glanced off triumphantly and harmlessly.



CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE, five minutes after five minutes were running away, and Ethel suddenly discovered with a shock how fast they had gone. The young people had walked right through the valley, and had been unknowingly led farther than they had supposed. There were two ways of getting home now,—the one by which they had come, which was secluded, but a much longer one than the other, which passed through a suburb of the town. Ethel looked at her watch, and was dismayed.

"The carriage is ordered at half-past four, and it is a quarter to four now," she exclaimed. "I must hurry home. There is not a moment to lose. This is the shorter way; is it not?" and she began walking at a fast pace along the public road.

"Yes, it is shorter; but it offers inconveniences," suggested O'Neil, who was too thorough a Frenchman ever, under any circumstances, to forget the *convenances*.

"What inconveniences? Oh! we may be seen," and Ethel stopped short. "Well, and what matter if we are?" a little defiantly, as she resumed her walk.

To tell the truth, O'Neil, flattered as he ought to have been, and was, no doubt, by his lady-love's superb indifference to public opinion, was a little dismayed by it too. He was deeply in love, and he was thoroughly imbued with strict notions regarding the prudence and circumspection which ought, in the world's eyes, to guide a young unmarried lady's every action, needless to say, those of the lady with whom he was in love, more than anybody else's. Nice would just be rousing itself now. Closed *jalousies* and eyes would open. Carriages would pass. Friends and acquaintances

would nod and stare, and wonder and talk. For himself he did not care; nothing they chose to say could injure him; but for this young girl beside him, for whom he felt a lover's chivalrous devotion, and a lover's jealous desire that her name should be sacred, and not bandied about from mouth to mouth, he did care very much indeed. For her to be seen in the company of a young man, alone, unchaperoned, on the public road, seemed to him to be an unparalleled catastrophe. In such an idle, wicked place as Nice, scandals had often been invented on less serious grounds. There was a delicacy, however, in mentioning the fact, unless Ethel could see it for herself.

"Of course, of course," the young man said, with difficulty keeping pace with her hasty steps. "What does it matter, after all? These little trifling infractions of the usages of society only assume importance in the eyes of— Confound it!" he exclaimed, in accents of extreme provocation, as a handsome barouche rolled past, nearly stifling them with a cloud of dust. "Confound it! If that is not Madame de Vergenne's carriage, the greatest gossip and most ill-natured woman in society! Thank Heaven, however, I think it is only her blind old husband who is in it. Yes. How fortunate!" and he heaved a sigh of relief. "I wonder whether the servants recog—"

For the second time, Ethel came to a dead stop, turning round upon her companion with some disdain. "How afraid you are of being seen with me, count!" she said with a light laugh. "Which is it,—for your own reputation, or for mine, that you feel so desperately nervous?"

"For neither," replied the count, a little abashed. "It is only because I am anxious that you should be spared the annoyance of hearing your actions commented upon, that I am sorry we did not return by the road we came."

"Who will dare to comment upon them?" began Ethel, kindling. Then the ludicrousness of the situation struck her, and she burst out laughing. "Oh, dear me! what a storm in a teakettle! Count, I always knew you were a terrible fudge. However, perhaps you are right; and, as I would not compromise you for all the world, here we must separate. Provisionally we are provided with two roads. I will pursue this one, which will bring me home in a quarter of an hour. You can take that to the left; which, after all, is, I think, your direct one to the *Cercle*, where doubtless you are going."

"But—but you will be alone. That is

not *convenable* either," remonstrated O'Neil, gradually growing excited.

" Solitude is better than bad company," rejoined Ethel saucily, and looking over her shoulder with a malicious smile. " I am an unprotected female. Let any one insult me who dares."

She was gone with a farewell wave of her hand. O'Neil did not attempt to follow her. Another carriage passed, from which ladies saluted him. More equipages were appearing in the distance. The road was becoming lively and crowded. The young people had not separated an instant too soon. It had been a close shave; and beads of perspiration started to O'Neil's forehead as he gracefully returned his passing friends' bows and smiles, and reflected how close it had been, and what an escape Ethel had had. Not so the young lady herself, who was pursuing her way filled with scornful amusement at her late companion's panic. " After all, how superior a thorough-bred Englishman is to any thing else on earth!" she was saying to herself; " and what a miserable thing it is to be a slave to public opinion!"

Nevertheless, five minutes later she could not help experiencing a sensation of relief at finding herself alone. It is all very well to entertain magnificent notions of the unimportance of public opinion in the abstract; but, when it comes to practical and personal applications, few of us are strong-minded enough to be quite proof against its strictures and censures. Ethel, for one, was not; and, as has been said, when, five minutes later, she heard her name called, and found herself face to face with Christine Delneuve and her mother, she felt actually grateful to Count O'Neil for his timely prudery. But she was alone, and that was sufficiently embarrassing. Moreover, she felt that she was looking flushed and conscious, and that Christine's clever eyes were scanning her face closely. After all, Christine had been right in her half-mocking prophecy, that their acquaintance-ship was not destined to make much progress. They had not met for two or three weeks,—since that day, indeed, on the Promenade, when the prophecy had been uttered. Their paths had diverged, and neither had wandered from her own to seek the other. Ethel, in the midst of her gayeties and amusements, had lost sight of the Delneuves, and, to tell the truth, had almost forgotten them.

" I went to see you, however, which is more than you did to me," she said with deprecating eagerness when they met.

Ethel acknowledged the truth of the

remark. " But we have been busy lately," she said, — " very busy indeed. You have visitors, besides, at the villa; have you not?"

" Yes: old Mrs. O'Neil, whom you know. She went to call upon you the other day; but, as usual, you were out. Why have you not come to return her visit?"

Christine laughed quietly. " I dare say that she will excuse us. We are only slightly acquainted with her; though we know her son very well. He was once at —, where we used to live. However, we must return Mrs. O'Neil's visit; must we not, mother?" she said.

" Certainly, dear child. So soon as every thing is arranged, and we have time. You will make our excuses to her, mademoiselle; will you not? In a day or two we shall do ourselves the honor of calling."

They had turned back with Ethel a little way, and had now reached the foot of the hill which led up to the villa. Madame Delneuve paused, saying that she was not young enough to go up a hill for the pleasure of coming down it again. But"—and she looked hesitatingly at Ethel, " we ought not to leave you alone. You are too young and too pretty, my child, for these solitary walks."

" I have not been alone exactly," Ethel began in some confusion.

" Ah! your maid follows you, or you have sent her on in front, perhaps," Madame Delneuve supposed; and Ethel did not know how to contradict her. Her conscience gave her a little twinge. She scorned a lie; and yet—and yet—had she not been just betrayed into one? " But how can I help it?" she asked herself angrily. " How can I tell her that I have been walking with Count O'Neil?"

Difficult, no doubt. And Ethel was already beginning to discover that it is easier to take the first step in the wrong road than to retrace it when once taken.

" But why will you not come up to the villa now?" she inquired abruptly, nervous and anxious to change the subject. " Pray do. Come up, and have a cup of tea, and rest a little."

Christine looked pale and tired, and as if she needed a rest; but the proposal was declined, nevertheless. " We have an engagement at home,—a particular engagement," Madame Delneuve said with a significant smile.

Ethel saw the smile; and she saw, too, a faint flush rising to Mademoiselle Delneuve's face. Suddenly the baron's gossip darted to her mind.

" A particular engagement," she repeated,

laughing. "That sounds ominous, madame."

"We may tell mademoiselle; may we not, *mon cœur*?" Madame Delneuve said with a doubtful look at her daughter. "It is no longer a secret."

"Is it possible? What? O Christine! are you really going to be married?" Ethel cried breathlessly, curiosity getting altogether the better of discretion.

"I believe so," Mademoiselle Delneuve replied, with a calm shrug of her shoulders. "And I am making my own *trousseau*," she added a little more eagerly.

"To be married! Oh, tell me all about it, please do!" Ethel entreated.

"There is so little to tell. M. Barbier is neither young nor handsome; but he is an excellent person, and very well off. He is good enough to like me; and I am, of course, very grateful and fortunate," Christine replied in cold, unmoved tones, and drawing figures with the top of her parasol upon the dusty road.

Never did a young lady announce her approaching nuptials in a more matter-of-fact, prosaic fashion, and Ethel could hardly conceal her disgust.

"Well, I congratulate you," she said dryly. Then she paused. Something in Christine's face stopped her. The girl was smiling gayly and bravely; but there was a suffering, cloudy look in her eyes, which touched Ethel's heart. "I hope that you will be very happy," she added in a softer tone.

"I hope so. I suppose I shall. He is very kind to me. It pleases my mother that I should marry, you see," she added in a whisper, and with a little laugh.

Ethel would have liked to have heard more; but she suddenly, and with a shock, remembered the flight of time.

"Oh! I must go. I shall get into a scrape at home!" she exclaimed. "But I want to see more of you, Christine. When can I see you again? When will you come to see me?"

Christine hesitated. Only a vague promise could be got out of her, that she would come up to the villa some evening soon.

"The marriage was to take place at Easter, and there was much to be done beforehand. However, she would certainly not let the week pass without coming."

"Very well. As soon as you can, then. I am always at home in the evening now, and our garden is delightful by moonlight," Ethel cried, hurrying away.

But there was little use in hurrying now. Already she was hopelessly behind

time. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, young ladies who possess parents and guardians are seldom at liberty to defy all rules of punctuality, and to absent themselves unaccompanied from home for several hours, without exposing themselves to remark. Fortune was against Ethel that day. Visitors had chanced to call while she was out, and she had been searched for high and low in vain; and now, when she at last reached the villa, the carriage had been waiting at the door for half an hour. The colonel was uneasy and out of all patience. His daughter's unpunctuality, so far as it concerned himself, he forgave readily enough; but her courtesy to their guest pained and provoked him.

They were all in the drawing-room waiting for her, when she reached home at last. The colonel looked angry, Mrs. O'Neil aggrieved, and Arthur O'Neil too! Ethel was dismayed to find that he was a member of this family conclave. Ethel's quick eye took it all in at a glance, and we may be sure resented it all too: they had been sitting in council upon her, wondering, commenting, finding fault, discussing her actions. And Ethel was at the moment nervous, excited, irritated, and, moreover, in the wrong. It irritated her that she should be controlled; it irritated her that she should be found out; more than all, did it irritate her to find the O'Neils sitting in judgment upon her,—those O'Neils who had been forced upon her against her will, and to whom she was indebted for all the annoyance and unhappiness which had so suddenly come into her life. Till they had come to Nice, all had been well. Till Mrs. O'Neil had stolen in between her and her father, there had been nothing but perfect confidence and affection between them. Till they had come to poison his ears with cruel imputations against her friends, she had been free as air to see whom she chose, to do as she pleased. And now, owing to them, she was forced to have recourse to expedients which she hated,—to stolen interviews, to secret appointments, to perhaps a whole system of deceit and scheming. It was too bad, too bad. And now, when she saw her father's grave face, and heard the unusual sounds of fault-finding falling from his lips, the last straw was put upon the camel's back, and all Ethel's wrongs and grievances rushed to her mind.

And so it was, that, instead of being sorry and deprecatory, the girl was roused and angry.

"Am I late?" she inquired with the most aggravating coolness, in answer to Col. Mildmay's short remark that she had

kept them waiting more than half an hour. "Am I late? But surely it does not matter. The later it is, the pleasanter and the cooler." And Miss Mildmay threw herself down in an easy-chair, and fanned her flushed face violently with her hat.

Her father colored.

"It does matter," he said sharply: "it matters extremely that you should be out alone for three hours, and that you should behave with so little politeness towards Mrs. O'Neil. At least, you might have the good manners to apologize to her."

His voice trembled, and it was evident that the words cost him a great deal.

Mrs. O'Neil interposed hastily.

"Colonel, pray say no more about it. She is a good child, and will not do it again. She forgot the time, I suppose; did you not, love? Bless me, how red you look! You have been walking too fast and too far, child."

Ethel tried to smile carelessly.

"Yes: I am very warm, and very tired too," she said. "I don't think I'll drive at all, papa. What a pity you waited for me!" and with this Miss Mildmay rose, and prepared to leave the room.

This was a little too much. Even little Mrs. O'Neil drew herself up, rustled her silk dress, and looked belligerent.

"Ethel!" Col. Mildmay said sharply.

"Well?" and the young lady paused with her hand on the handle of the door, and looked round over her shoulder.

"Ethel, you owe Mrs. O'Neil an apology. Make it to her at once."

There was a pause. Ethel was not red now, but very white.

"What am I to apologize for?" she inquired presently with a light laugh. "For keeping her waiting? But why did she wait? Why did you wait? Why did anybody wait? Surely you are quite enough, and don't want me. I am not a person of so much importance; am I?"

"You are my daughter; and my guests are yours, and I expect you to treat them with common courtesy. Ethel, come over here!"

"What for? Papa, I am tired, and want to rest. Pray go out to drive, and don't make matters worse by keeping the horses waiting longer. Dear me! what a fuss about nothing!"

"Ethel, come over here!" repeated her father, as she opened the door.

"What for?" and the girl did not move.

"Come over here! You must apologize to Mrs. O'Neil."

"O colonel, pray don't! The child is not well. She looks as though she had

caught a fever. Pray, say no more about it: I can go away. Indeed, it is high time for me to be thinking of going home," said Mrs. O'Neil with mingled dignity and anger and amazement, which, under any other circumstances, would have been entertaining. But the situation was much too tragic a one to laugh at. Something resembling a suppressed smile was upon Mr. O'Neil's lips, it is true; but as he had retired into a far corner, and was discreetly looking out of the window, nobody perceived it.

Every one else was grave enough.

"Nonsense!" said the colonel. "Surely, Mrs. O'Neil, you will pay no attention to the freak of a silly girl. Are you not well, darling?" he inquired quickly, and with an anxious glance.

"Oh, dear! yes; quite well," responded Miss Mildmay airily.

"Then, love, come over here, and explain it all to Mrs. O'Neil. Tell her that you are sorry,—that it is a mistake."

"Sorry for what? What is a mistake? But it was no mistake: I could not manage to get back earlier. But I am sorry that you waited for me, of course, since it put you all out so much, and I did not mean to drive at all."

And with this Miss Mildmay left the room. What happens on such occasions as these? Nobody knows. They are occasions upon which the cleverest and readiest-tongued people often find themselves lamentably at a loss, and when the wisest thing to do is generally to do and say as little as possible. Never was man more distressed and embarrassed than was poor Col. Mildmay then. Women are much better equal to these emergencies than men. Family life is their sphere; and they are accustomed to its ups and downs, to its calms and storms. When a tempest breaks forth, they do not immediately suppose that all is lost, and irretrievable ruin and havoc made in the domestic circle: on the contrary, they know that it will pass by, leaving things pretty much as they were before, and having served its purpose of purifying the atmosphere, and clearing the air.

Col. Mildmay was overwhelmed and distressed; but Mrs. O'Neil would not listen to his explanations and lamentations.

"The child isn't well. Don't say another word about it, Henry. She will come to her senses in half an hour, never fear. But I don't think I'll drive, thank you! I feel just a little flurried and nervous, and would rather rest till dinner-time," she said, interrupting his apologies, and speaking in a very shaky, uncertain voice, which betrayed

that the old lady felt more than her kind heart and her loving pity for Col. Mildmay would let her show.

But when presently, to everybody's relief, he had left the room, her suppressed wrath burst forth.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, drawing a long breath. "Was there ever a more impudent, ill-mannered girl?"

"Well, her manners are certainly not the best," said Mr. O'Neil, emerging from his retirement in the window, with a dry little laugh. "But she was provoked to it. Now, mother, did I not tell you that?" —

"Arthur, don't you know that 'did I not tell you' is the most aggravating form of speech men or women can use?" interrupted his mother pettishly.

"Well, then, I did not tell you. But, whether I did or not, I certainly need not tell you now that this state of things cannot go on. Mother, you must come away. You are not welcome here, and you are doing no good," said O'Neil in a decided tone.

"No good! Of course, I am doing good. Why, poor Henry is a different man since I came," replied Mrs. O'Neil indignantly.

"Yes, I know that; but" —

Then followed the old arguments over again, by which he had at first in vain attempted to dissuade her from coming to the villa, and which were now stronger than before. Col. Mildmay was better; there seemed no very immediate cause for fear; he would soon be well enough to leave Nice himself.

"Let him come over to Ireland to see you if he likes," said Mr. O'Neil. "Receive him and his daughter in your own house; let them stay as long as they please: but for Heaven's sake don't intrude any longer in theirs."

To all of which entreaties the old lady would only half listen. She was annoyed and offended with Ethel; but she did not look upon the recent little outbreak in the same serious light as did her son. She was well and comfortable at the villa, and she was not in such a great hurry to leave it. It agreed with her, and she was fond of the colonel; and she had given him a solemn promise to remain with him so long as he remained at Nice.

"On account of those dreadful people, Arthur, you know," she explained. "They might be troublesome if I were not here to protect her."

Mr. O'Neil smiled.

"It is on their account that it annoys her that you should be here, mother," he said.

"Do you think so? But what is to be

done? It would be a sin and a shame to allow the poor child to fall into the hands of such people. Nobody but yourself could think of such a thing, Arthur."

Further remonstrance was useless. Mr. O'Neil, like a wise man, did not attempt it.

"Well, as you like," he said. "I hoped that I might be able to induce you to come with me; but I see that I must give it up. For my part, I am thinking of starting the day after to-morrow."

Mrs. O'Neil was dismayed.

"What?" she inquired anxiously.

It was a constant subject of dispute between them. Mr. O'Neil wanted to leave, Mrs. O'Neil to stay. For the last fortnight, he had been threatening to go every day; and now it appeared as though long threatening must come at last. The old lady was in despair. She adored her son, and could not bear him out of her sight; and though she did not choose to leave the villa, yet she did choose to have the option of doing so at any moment that she should discover that it really was too hot to hold her. But, for once, Mr. O'Neil was obdurate, and would not give in.

"After all, maybe I am a fool to put myself out on their account," she said in a tone of melancholy indecision, after having in vain tried first by coaxing, then by scolding, to shake his determination, — "maybe I am an old fool for my pains, and nothing more."

"At all events, I can't flatter myself that I am of much use to Miss Mildmay," observed Mr. O'Neil, smiling. "She did not deign to say 'Good-morning' to me just now."

He spoke gayly; and yet it was easy to see that he was piqued.

"The saney chit!" exclaimed Mrs. O'Neil indignantly.

Then she looked at her son, and groaned.

"Arthur, why are you growing so gray?" she inquired with mingled perplexity and despair.

He laughed, and threw back his head with a quick gesture of indifference, and he colored slightly too. The fact was, that he plainly read the thought which was passing through his mother's mind.

"What a silly old lady you are!" he began playfully, and then he stopped. The door had suddenly opened; and Ethel was standing on the threshold, looking in.

She paused, and hesitated for a second, with her eyes upon Mr. O'Neil. He was looking at her, and thinking how pretty she was, — very pretty just then, with a shy, doubtful expression in her face which be-

came it well, and with a bright flush still lingering upon her cheeks. Seeing him, she seemed at first inclined to go away; but after a second she came forward, looking at him still, truth to tell, a little defiantly.

"Mrs. O'Neil," she said, walking straight up to the old lady, and standing before her chair in a childish, graceful attitude, half of disdain, half of humility, — "Mrs. O'Neil, I was very rude to you just now, and I am quite ashamed of myself. I hope you will forgive me; please do!" And then, with one of her sudden impulses, she bent down and gave her a hearty kiss.

Beyond a doubt, the gods have favorites. To some they give fortune, to others talents, to these luck, to those beauty; but, to those they love best, they give something better than all these things, — the gift of fascination, that gift which can neither be acquired nor bought nor imitated, but which is a subtle, innate charm, hard to define, but impossible to resist.

Ethel possessed this magical gift to perfection. She was charming then, — very charming. If she had been downright cruel to Mrs. O'Neil, instead of only rude and saucy, she would have had to be forgiven all the same. But, as it was, the tender old lady yielded at once, melting like snow in sunshine, and, taking the girl in her arms, told her that she was the best child in the world.

It was precisely one of those feminine, emotional little scenes over which men laugh so cynically. To them a quarrel has but the one part, — the quarrel. To women it has two, — the quarrel and the making-up. Ethel and Mrs. O'Neil made it up then; and Mr. O'Neil looked on with a slightly satirical smile, and a curious, half-interested, half-disdainful expression in his eyes.

Presently he seemed to tire of it, however, and, opening the glass door, stepped out upon the terrace. But his mother called him back.

"Where are you going to? What a fidget you are!" she remarked. "Now, Arthur, you surely are not going away the day after to-morrow; are you?" she inquired coaxingly. "Just think, child, he wants to carry me away with him in something like thirty-six hours. Did you ever hear any thing so unreasonable?" she appealed to Ethel.

The clever old lady had chosen her moment well. Miss Mildmay, penitent and ashamed, was horrified at the thought of her want of hospitality and courtesy being the cause of Mrs. O'Neil's sudden departure, and made up for all her shortcomings

by an eager declaration that she would not let her go. Mr. O'Neil contemplated the pair sitting amicably and affectionately together on the sofa, and knew quite well that he was defeated, and that his mother would remain on at the villa.

"Very well," he said, smiling a half-provoked smile: "I will come back, then, and fetch you, whenever you like."

Mrs. O'Neil groaned. "Well, if men are not the most obstinate and fidgety creatures!" she exclaimed impatiently.

And again she appealed to Ethel to know whether there was common sense in her son's insisting upon travelling all the way to London for the mere pleasure of travelling back in a fortnight.

"For, of course, I could not think of taking such a journey without you, Arthur," she said with *naïve* egotism.

But as, a little while ago, Mr. O'Neil had declined to enter into the question as to whether his mother was bound to remain at Nice for Ethel's sake, so did she now decline to express an opinion as to whether he was bound to delay his journey for his mother's sake.

"It seemed foolish, a pity," she said coldly and indifferently; "but she supposed that he had reasons, — business, perhaps."

"Business, humbug!" interrupted his mother impatiently.

And then an interruption came, and the matter rested for the present.

CHAPTER XII.

THAT evening the baron made his appearance at the villa. It was two or three days since they had seen him; for his visits were no longer as frequent as before Mrs. O'Neil's arrival. "Now that the colonel had such charming society close at hand," the old gentleman said, "he no longer was in need of his." But the fact was, that the baron did not very keenly appreciate the "charming society" himself; and, as in duty bound to his own friends, he entertained some hostile sentiments to the colonel's.

Perhaps it was curiosity more than any thing else which brought him this evening. Affairs did not seem to wear a very flourishing aspect at the villa. The storm of the day had been succeeded by the dulness of re-action. Col. Mildmay looked even more ill than usual. Mrs. O'Neil was depressed and tired, and a little cross.

Her son was smoking a lonely cigar upon the terrace. Ethel was invisible; and when, at last, she did make her appearance, she was pale and grave, and altogether unlike herself. She came out upon the terrace, where the baron — having found Col. Mildmay languid, and disinclined for conversation, and Mrs. O'Neil curled up upon the sofa, and resolved not to be disturbed in the enjoyment of her after-dinner nap (a sacred habit which could never be departed from without the most disastrous results to the old lady's welfare and happiness) — had just accepted a cigar from Arthur O'Neil. "Why should I not?" he had said to himself when the offer had been made him. "To be sure, the man is the enemy of my friends; but am I, therefore, bound to be his enemy, also? Bah! I will see what he is made of before I take the trouble to detest him."

And so the two gentlemen smoked the pipe of concord together. It was the first time they had met; but they were both men of the world, and, though well aware that each one was probably prejudiced against the other, neither seemed to consider the reason a sufficient one to disturb the mutual good will of the passing moment. Yet it was not long before their conversation wandered upon delicate ground. The baron was the soul of discretion and politeness; but he was excessively curious too. From the reserved and taciturn colonel he had been able to elicit but little. Between his friends and this new importation of O'Neils he knew that a quarrel existed. From Madame O'Neil and her son he had heard their version of the affair; and, of course, he believed it firmly. Nevertheless, he felt anxious to hear some account from the other side too; and now, finding himself *tête-à-tête* with the rival uncle, of whom he had heard so much, the opportunity was too good to be lost.

Perhaps his companion was as well inclined as himself to broach the topic which was uppermost in both their minds. At all events, when the baron had with profound but well-concealed dexterity given him an opening, he seized upon it eagerly. "What is this young fellow like?" he inquired, as Count O'Neil's name was casually mentioned. "Of his mother I know enough, — more than enough; but I am quite in the dark about this — this fascinating young charmer," he said with a constrained little laugh, and a quick glance towards the far end of the terrace. Ethel was standing there, her white dress glimmering in the moonlight. Perhaps she was in a romantic mood, or a cross one, or a sad one: at all

events she was unsociable, and had only joined the gentlemen for a minute or two, just to say "good-evening" to the baron. The baron's eyes followed Mr. O'Neil's, and he laughed too.

"Ah! the count is a *beau garçon*," he said; "as you say, a charmer, handsome, agreeable, — a lady-killer, in short." His conquests are innumerable, I believe.

"And is that really one of them?" Mr. O'Neil inquired incredulously, and looking at Ethel still.

"My dear sir, do you make me such a question? Were you to put the converse of it to me, I might, perhaps, be able to answer it. The count is certainly mademoiselle's devoted slave: of that, at least, I can assure you."

"Count!" said Mr. O'Neil impatiently. "He seemed to me a coxcomb, — nothing more nor less."

The baron smiled, and gave him a furtive glance. "He is jealous, — on my word of honor, he is jealous," he said to himself. "His heart is touched too." And the small amount of malice that was in the baron's nature was delightfully tickled.

"It is a foolish business," Mr. O'Neil went on after a little pause, — "a foolish business. Miss Mildmay might do better for herself than that."

"That depends," observed the baron laconically.

"Ah! you mean that everything depends upon the end. Well, you are right. She would certainly make a charming mistress of Castle Garvah," said Mr. O'Neil, laughing.

"A painfully commercial way of putting it. Perhaps I meant something else, — that the young people liked and suited one another. It would be natural were it so. Their ages" —

"Oh, yes! quite natural, of course. Her father would never allow it, though."

"Would he not?"

"I should think not, unless he were a madman," said Mr. O'Neil shortly.

"Indeed? Are you so very sure of success, then? Pray forgive me if it is an indiscreet question," he added hastily: "it slipped from me."

"There is nothing to forgive. Am I so sure of success? Well, I will be frank with you, baron, and you are at liberty to repeat my words if you choose. No: I am not sure of success, — far from it, indeed; but I am sure of attempting success, and winning it if I can. The prize is worth fighting for; and I mean to fight for it to the end." He spoke warmly, and his eyes flashed. It was evident that he was a man

of determination, and that his words were not a mere idle boast or threat.

The baron gave a low whistle. "You are quite right, of course; quite right, my dear sir. It is impossible not to applaud your determination. I believe, however, that — ahem — my friends feel very secure: they experience no apprehension at all — at least, so they tell me — of ultimate results," he added, in the pleasantest way imaginable.

Mr. O'Neil laughed. If the baron wanted to provoke him, he failed miserably. "I wish that I could say as much for myself," he said good-humoredly; "but I confess I cannot: I know that there are some chances against me."

"Are there really?" inquired a soft but eager voice at his elbow. "Well, then, if that is the case, could you not?" —

"Could I not what, Miss Mildmay?" as Ethel, who had joined them unperceived, paused and hesitated.

"Settle — arrange — compromise, I believe you call it. O Mr. Neil! could you not really?" she inquired with breathless eagerness.

He looked at her with a thoughtful smile. "Since you are such a lawyer, perhaps you could suggest a possible compromise," he said courteously.

"I can, indeed: can't you divide the property?"

"Impossible! Another one?"

"Well, then, — but perhaps you would not do it. — Count O'Neil told me that he did propose it, but that you refused," she said in a melancholy tone.

"Proposed what?"

"Oh! that it should be yours as long as you live; but after that — you are older than he is, you know," she added hurriedly, her voice suddenly faltering.

Mr. O'Neil had turned from her with a quick, sudden movement. He was angry with her — she knew that he was — for her audacious proposition; and, when she saw the baron's look of mingled amusement and surprise, she felt ready to sink into the earth.

There was an awkward little pause, which Mr. O'Neil broke at last. Perhaps, after all, he was not angry: at all events, he spoke quite gently and quietly. "There are two reasons against your proposal," he said: "the first is, that I may marry; the second is, that under no circumstances will any willing act of mine ever countenance the claims of a man who is an impostor, — who is not what he pretends to be."

"Count O'Neil is not an impostor! I will never believe it, — never!" exclaimed Ethel indignantly.

"Possibly not a willing one: he may be but the tool."

"Nor Madame O'Neil either: I will not believe a single word against either of them. Baron, why don't you stand up for your friends?"

The baron coughed uneasily: he was a brave man in the battle-field, and one to die at his post; but, in social affairs, he was not inclined needlessly to knock his head against stone walls. "*Mon Dieu! mademoiselle,*" he said, "where is the use? Mr. O'Neil is a sensible and reasonable man; and he is aware that, as is natural, my sympathies and inclinations are — ahem! — not with him exactly in this unpleasant affair; but, for all that, I do not consider it necessary to render myself odious to him by constantly reminding him of the fact. Ah! I see scorn in your eyes, — those beautiful eyes, which —

"Come, baron, leave my eyes alone: they are not beautiful, but at least they are true," said Ethel, half laughing, though she was angry still.

But the conversation was successfully diverted from a disagreeable subject. Everybody felt that it had gone far enough, that, indeed, there was no use in pursuing it. Presently the baron made his escape. The evening was going by, and he was not enjoying it. At the villa, there was no enjoyment to be found; every thing and everybody there were at sixes and sevens; a pleasant chat with any one was impossible. Family differences and troubles do not promote sociability, and snug sociability was the baron's element. Suddenly he remembered an engagement. "A little musical *réunion* at my friend Madame de Concierres'," he explained. "They would never forgive me if I failed them: I am promised there for a week, and they are counting upon me. My compliments to your father, mademoiselle; I will come to see him to-morrow; to-night my company only fatigues him." And the old gentleman made his bow, and took his departure with a suspicious eagerness and haste.

Ethel seemed inclined to follow his example. "It is chilly," she said so soon as he had left them, and she made a step towards the house.

"I will fetch you a shawl. That muslin dress, though very pretty, is no protection."

"Thank you, but — I would rather go in."

"Because I am here. Generally you remain out much later than this. Perhaps my cigar annoys you?" he suggested politely: "there it goes." And he pitched it away."

"It does not annoy me in the least. I—I rather like it. Where are you going?"

But Mr. O'Neil had already gone, and had almost come back too. At all events, he was back before she had had time to leave the terrace, carrying a soft, warm shawl. In an instant it was on her shoulders. "You will not be chilly now," he said.

Ethel did not know how to resist him. It was evident that he seemed to take it as a matter of course that now she would remain out. And so she did, walking up and down the terrace by his side, and saying to herself, at the end of each turn, that she would go in after the next. But for all that she remained. Mr. O'Neil was a pleasant companion. He had travelled much, and could make himself agreeable. Intuitively Ethel felt that he was trying to make himself agreeable to her,—that he was giving himself pains to amuse and entertain her. She was flattered first, then interested. There was a certain piquancy in the situation which she enjoyed. With inward amusement she recollects Count O'Neil's jealous complaints that very day. Random complaints of the sort are often dangerous: they suggest foolish notions. Even when they are quite groundless, they may work mischief in silly heads. Imaginary wrongs sometimes become real ones by sheer force of imagination; and lovers would do better to control their feelings and their tongues than to give expression and form to every vague phantom which crosses their brain. For the first time this evening, it occurred to Ethel that Mr. O'Neil could be any thing but a middle-aged, uninteresting man, old enough to be the count's father, upon whom she would have as little thought of throwing away a coquettish thought as upon the baron himself. For a long time they talked on indifferent subjects; but suddenly Mr. O'Neil said, half laughing,—

"You were taken in this afternoon, Miss Mildmay: you know you were. You would have done better not to 'make it up.' You will never get rid of my mother now. You have made her too fond of you. I cannot induce her to come away."

Ethel was silent. It was hard to make an honest reply. "We shall all soon be leaving Nice, I suppose," she said at last.

"And you will owe us the grudge of having spoiled your visit," he went on. "Miss Mildmay, I am very sorry; but it was not my fault."

"It was nobody's fault, I suppose."

She spoke in a sad, provoked tone; and, truth to tell, a sudden feeling of sadness had come upon her. Her own words had

caused it,—"They would soon all be leaving Nice." And then what was to happen after that? What was to be the end of it all? Perhaps her companion guessed her thoughts. "At least, you will give me the credit of not having attempted to influence your father," he said.

"Your mother influenced him. Till she—till you came, Madame O'Neil and her son were his friends as well as mine. And now"—

"But what would you have had us do? How could we have been silent when your father applied to us to know the truth? We told him merely what we believed to be the truth. He was at liberty to judge for himself whether it was the truth or not."

"But your mother never ceases to prejudice him against them. Papa used always to see with my eyes; but now he sees with hers," said Ethel bitterly.

"Mothers are partial: mine wishes me to be Lord O'Neil's heir," said Mr. O'Neil quietly.

Ethel paused in her walk, and, leaning over the marble balustrade of the terrace, looked down upon the moonlit valley at her feet. There was not a solitary cloud in the dark blue heavens; but they were thickly spangled with bright, splendid stars. It was all very beautiful and peaceful; but Ethel saw, or rather felt, nothing of it. Her thoughts were far away.

"And what is this famous Castle Garvagh like?" she inquired suddenly, with a sort of contemptuous wonder,—"this marvellous bone of contention between you all? Count O'Neil, for one, does not seem to consider it such an Elysium," she added with a short laugh.

"Nor is it an Elysium exactly. Yet it is a fine place, though going fast to ruin. But it has natural beauties which can never be destroyed. It is beautiful!"

Ethel glanced at him. There was enthusiasm in his voice, and ardor in his face.

"Yes, it is beautiful," he went on; "wild, but picturesque in the extreme. The house is immense,—a palace. It stands upon the shores of what seems to be a lake, but is in fact an arm of the sea, and which is studded with many wooded islets. It is the third house which has been built upon the estate. The two former ones were burnt down,—one in James II.'s time; the other in '92. The story goes in the country that, till it has been burnt for the third time, peace will not be restored to the family," he added, laughing.

"The sooner it is burnt the better, then," Miss Mildmay said gayly and giddily.

Her companion gave her a dry look. "Let us rather trust that natural means will answer your end as well," he said. "My uncle cannot live much longer: the thing is impossible."

Ethel had the grace to blush at the thrust. "It is nothing to me how long he lives," she said rather confusedly.

Mr. O'Neil laughed. "You are very young, you know," he went on, half satirically, half banteringly. "There is plenty of time. It would be a foolish mistake to make. Take my advice, and have a little patience."

"Miss Mildmay was fairly roused now, and turned on him indignantly.

"You mean to insinuate that I have a selfish motive for wishing my friends to win," she said, flushing rosily red. "Does one always think of one's self? I for one do not. I was not thinking of myself in the least. What is Castle Garvagh to me? What is it to me to whom it belongs, or to whom it does not?"

She looked very pretty and very graceful in her offended pride, standing before him like an insulted goddess.

"Is it nothing really?" he inquired, looking down at her with a keen, smiling glance.

"No." And at the moment she thought she was speaking the truth. If she liked Count O'Neil at all, of course she liked him equally well, were he rich or poor. And if she did not like him — Even on this point this provoking, wayward Ethel did not seem to have come to any irrevocable or definite conclusion as yet.

They had been near a quarrel again; but it had been again staved off. Mr. O'Neil's disagreeable, satirical mood passed away suddenly, as it had come. Once more he was the pleasant, courteous companion of a few minutes ago, whose conversation and manner were somehow a more subtle compliment than many an ardent, extravagant speech.

And Ethel, as we know, dearly loved compliments of any kind, and had, to do her justice, the good taste to prefer the fragrance of the most delicate ones, vain and silly child as she was.

It was late when they entered the house at last. The colonel and Mrs. O'Neil had revived, and were quarrelling over a game of draughts; but, when their children came in through the glass door from the terrace, Mrs. O'Neil looked up at them with a smile, nodded her pretty white head, gave the colonel a gentle kick under the table, and made a wrong move, which she had been determined to avoid, and which lost her the game in a twinkling.

But she bore her defeat good-humoredly. "Where is that chattering old baron?" she inquired. "I thought he was with you all this time."

"Oh, dear, no! He has gone half an hour ago," Ethel said.

"Indeed, indeed, child!" And Mrs. O'Neil nodded her head again, and looked smilingly wise. "He showed his sense," she observed: "nobody wanted him, I am sure."

"I did not," said her son, with a laugh; "though the baron is good company enough, and a pleasant fellow, provided one don't see him too often, I imagine," he added.

Mr. O'Neil spoke gayly; and his eyes, which were his mother's over again, were sparkling.

"You are looking very well to-night, Arthur," Mrs. O'Neil observed, contemplating him thoughtfully. "What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

It was true. He was looking well, — young and handsome and animated, instead of grave and pale and composed.

"Doing to myself? Nothing. I have been looking at the moon, and feeling romantic out on the terrace."

Ethel glanced at him, and perceived the change of which his mother spoke. Perhaps, with a woman's quickness, she felt that she had had something to do with it, and, with a woman's vanity, was pleased. Perhaps, too, she was amazed at the novel colors in which Mr. O'Neil was coming out. At all events, for the rest of the evening she was in the best of humors, — gay, gracious, amiable; the life of the little party, to which she imparted the brightness of her mood. The colonel's weary, suffering face relaxed as he watched his pretty daughter's smiles, and heard her laughter, and submitted to her tender little cares, grown, alas! somewhat remiss of late. Any little lurking irritation or offence caused by Ethel's conduct during the day, which still might linger in Mrs. O'Neil's gentle bosom, was now completely routed by the girl's 'sunshiny' ways. In short, the sky was serene and peaceful as though it had never known a storm.

CHAPTER XIII.

TRUE to his promise, the baron came next day; but the colonel, who had had a bad night, was still in his room.

Ethel received him alone; and in five minutes she perceived that the old man had some special piece of gossip on his mind which he was longing to impart.

"I have just come from my friends the Delneuves," he said fussily; "and"—

"Christine is going to be married," Ethel said with a laugh. "Ah, baron! you see, I know the secret."

He looked disappointed. "So you know it; do you? *Mon Dieu!* What sieves women are! Yes, she is going to be married."

"And what sort is he,—M. Barbier, I mean? Baron, I am convinced he is odious."

"A bad compliment to me, since the marriage is one of my making. No, mademoiselle: M. Barbier is not odious. He is, on the contrary, an excellent person."

"Yes; but he is not young or handsome or nice, or—tell me all about it, baron," she said coaxingly. "What is he like really?"

"Well," said the baron with a little hesitation, "to begin with, he is between fifty and fifty-five,—a nice, steady, sensible age, mademoiselle," as Ethel shuddered saucily. "And he is bald and stout, and rather red in the face. No: *you* would not call him handsome certainly," he added, shaking his head, and smiling thoughtfully.

"How dreadful! But why does she marry him?"

"Woman's vocation is marriage," said the baron oracularly. "To accomplish it, a husband is necessary; but a husband is not always the easiest thing in the world to find. M. Barbier has been found. The conclusion is evident."

"Horrible!" Ethel ejaculated. "Poor Christine! But why does she marry him?" she repeated indignantly. "And to think that she once cared for some one else! Oh, how sad it all is!"

"Ah, yes! there it is. She did once care for somebody else; but that somebody else was useless so far as helping her to fulfil her vocation went. He did not marry her, you see."

Ethel was silent. The baron's somewhat coarse outspokenness offended her. "He is rich, I suppose," she said presently, and with some scorn. "Is that it, baron?"

The old gentleman chuckled, and rubbed his hands. "Ha, ha! How wise we are, Miss Ethel! Well, I believe it has something to say to it, certainly. Barbier is not rich exactly; but he is well off. His wife will have every thing necessary, every

thing agreeable to her, even. It will do very nicely,—very nicely indeed," he repeated complacently.

Ethel turned away in disgust. "I wonder at Christine: I do indeed!" she broke out warmly. "I did not think she was the commonplace, weak sort of girl to do such a thing as this."

"She is not commonplace, neither is she weak," observed the baron composedly. "Come, come, Miss Ethel: don't be hard on her. What is she doing, after all?"

"She is selling herself: I am sure she is. She does not care for the man. I know she does not."

"Selling herself! Granted. What is marriage but a sale, a bargain? The highest bidders win the prizes. You, for instance, mademoiselle, may reasonably believe yourself sure of a prize," with a gallant little bow. "Doubtless my friend Barbier, were he to aspire to the honor of your fair hand, would be an imbecile, a lunatic. It is all a matter of relative value. Christine, you see"—

"Well, and what of Christine?"

"Though an excellent, charming, clever little girl, has not the same pretensions. In the first place, her appearance"—

"She is very nice looking, baron."

"Hum! Passable, if you will. *Elle n'est pas belle comme vous, mademoiselle.*"

Ethel liked compliments, as we know; but this one, at the expense of her friend, was distasteful to her.

"Comparisons are odious, baron," she said shortly.

"Then," he continued, in nowise disconcerted, "her age"—

"Her age!"

"Yes; for an unmarried girl, it is somewhat advanced. What will you have? It is the notion of the country. She is five or six and twenty; and men naturally inquire why, since she is not in a convent, she is not already the mother of a family. You look astonished. Our French ideas surprise you, then?"

"Indeed they do," Ethel confessed.

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed. "It is all a matter of custom," he said. "But to terminate. My young friend has, unfortunately, no *dot*. *Raison suprême* for not being too particular in the choice of a husband."

Ethel looked disgusted. "Horrible!" she said. "I condemn Christine, and declare that I have lost all interest in her."

But the baron only laughed at her for her pains. "Condemnation comes quite naturally and readily to youth," he observed composedly. "Age possesses at least one

virtue,—that of toleration. I may not always approve of what my neighbors do; but at least I am willing to admit that they may possibly have excellent reasons of their own for their conduct. For instance,”— and he smiled slyly,—“when I see a young lady torturing two lovers at the same moment, if I were given to rash judgments, I might possibly suppose her to be of a wantonly cruel disposition. But I do, in fact, nothing of the sort. I merely say to myself that it is her way,—a little roundabout way, perhaps,—yet a way of practising charity to her neighbors”—

“Baron!” And Ethel grew as red as fire.

“Come, mademoiselle. After all, you must acknowledge that our French customs possess some advantages. Simplicity of arrangement is one of them. Two lovers at a time is one too many. At least, the old love is dead and decently buried before the new one intrudes itself upon our notice.”

“What?” as Ethel's eyes flamed indignantly.

“Well; but is it not true, mademoiselle?” he inquired with one of his gay chuckles. “Is it not a fact, that the handsome Irishman *vous faisait la cour* last night, and that you—ahem—did not quite dislike it? You are displeased at my insinuations? Yet I am the soul of discretion; and you have reason to be grateful to me,—great reason. Just think that I met the count half an hour afterwards at Madame de Courcelles', and I never breathed a word,—not a single word. Ah the poor fellow!—the poor little fellow!”

“Baron, how provoking you are!” Then she laughed, rather a piqued laugh. “And so he went to Madame de Courcelles' after all,” she said; “and yet he vowed that nothing would induce him to go since I could not. Baron, I tell you that all men are wretches, and that it is a right and proper thing to torture them as much as possible, otherwise they would never get to heaven.”

“Ha, ha! And it is a woman's mission to give them their purgatory in this life. Brava, mademoiselle! Come now, though: why should not the poor count go to Madame de Courcelles'? Why should he not amuse himself after his fashion as you do after yours. Not that he did amuse himself, though, poor little fellow! He assured me that he was miserable, and, needless to say, was eager in his inquiries after you. But be easy, mademoiselle. As I tell you, I was discretion itself, and took good care not to mention that I had

left you tête-à-tête upon a moonlit terrace with”—

“Baron, for shame! Can you never be serious? It is no subject for jesting, I am sure,” she said half crossly, half playfully.

“Alphonse Karr says somewhere,” proceeded the baron with mock gravity, “Il y a une chose dont il serait dangereux que les femmes s'aperçussent,—c'est qu'il n'est pas d'amants aussi aimables que ceux qu'elles rendent malheureux.’ You wish to make the experiment, mademoiselle; do you not?”

“Baron, you are very cruel. I don't want to make anybody unhappy. I am sure that I am unhappy enough myself between them all!” exclaimed Miss Mildmay pettishly.

The baron looked sympathetic in a moment. To tell the truth, he was curious, and well inclined to receive a confidence; but there was no time for one then. A quick step made itself heard outside upon the terrace. “*Peste!*” muttered the baron, and then, with a little satirical laugh, “Here comes Don Juan in person. Beware, mademoiselle, beware!”

“As if”—began Ethel indignantly. “Mr. O'Neil is coming to see his mother,” she said hurriedly: “he always comes at this hour. I will go and tell her.”

But she either could not or did not make her escape before Mr. O'Neil had entered the room. Then it was impossible to run away without saying “good-morning” to him. Even after that, she lingered a little still. A book of photographs was upon the table before her, and she was turning over the leaves absently. The two gentlemen were discussing the weather.

“The sun is becoming troublesome,” the baron was saying. “Hot for railway journeys. That is a confoundedly warm journey you have before you to Paris, monsieur. When are you thinking of starting?”

“To-morrow, I believe,” Mr. O'Neil said. But he said it like a man who had not quite made up his mind; and his eyes were fixed upon Ethel's grave profile as it bent over the book.

“To-morrow, eh! And madame, your mother—does she also accompany you?” he inquired with would-be carelessness.

Mr. O'Neil gave him a keen glance. “I think not,” he said shortly. “Colonel and Miss Mildmay have asked her to remain; and she insists upon doing so, against my wishes.”

“Ah!” repeated the baron, contemplatively rubbing his shining hat. “You have business, perhaps, which forces you to depart.”

"Yes, I have business; but"—

Perhaps it was that "but" which made Ethel look up from her book at the moment, and smile one of her most distracting smiles.

"Fabulous business!" she said gayly. "The fact is, baron, Mr. O'Neil finds Nice dull, and can't stand it any longer."

"Hum," said the baron rather dryly; and Mr. O'Neil said nothing.

The colonel and Mrs. O'Neil came in at the moment, producing a diversion. But the observant old baron had made a note in his mind for all that. Later on, when he was going away, and Ethel was accompanying him down the avenue,—

"Could you not have been content with the nephew, and have left the uncle alone?" he inquired. "But you want to have two shafts to your bow, perhaps. Eh! Miss Ethel?"

The girl turned two indignant, flaming violet eyes upon him. "What do you mean, baron? what do you mean?" she demanded angrily.

"The poor little count!—the poor little count!" teased the baron.

Ethel frowned; then she laughed. Life was too bright and pleasant a thing just then for her to be out of sorts with anybody or any thing.

"Well, and what about the 'poor little count,' as you call him?" she said with a sudden softness of voice. "Did he speak of me last night, baron?"

"Yes, he did."

"And what did he say?"

Mon Dieu! Can I remember the enamoured jargon? Not a word of it. I do recollect one thing he said; but I protest I don't understand a word of it,—not a single word. He told me to remind you that the little chapel of Sainte Barbe is a delightful spot these fine mornings. Where the chapel of Sainte Barbe is, or, for the matter of that, who Sainte Barbe is or was, I have not the faintest idea," concluded the baron, looking mystified.

Ethel crimsoned, and bit her lip. These underhand dealings, these stolen interviews, were sorely against her grain. To her open and frank nature any thing like concealment was a burden; and she felt provoked and wounded at the apparent little boast which Count O'Neil was making of them.

"I do not know much about Sainte Barbe, either," she said shortly. And then she looked at the baron hesitatingly and doubtfully. His face was impenetrable as a mask. Yet she intimately felt that he perfectly well knew the meaning of the foolish message which he had just transmitted. If, however, she had a momentary inclination

to take him into her confidence, and to seek aid from him, it passed away; or rather, perhaps, the opportunity failed. They had reached the villa gate now, and the baron was in a hurry to be gone. As usual, Madame Somebody or other was expecting him. The baron always had a convenient engagement on hands. The truth was, that a sudden terror of Ethel's confidence had seized upon him. If he was a curious man, he was also a prudent one. Too good-natured ever actually to refuse to be of use where to be of use was possible, he yet had a nervous shrinking of needlessly burning his fingers with his neighbors' affairs. At present, he had one marriage on hands,—that of Christine; and that was enough. The rich English girl's matrimonial projects belonged to a different order of things altogether. Something whispered to him that they might be ticklesome and troublesome projects to meddle with; and he was even beginning to regret the part he had already played in them. He was her father's friend; and though he might, could not indeed help, winking at, he could not openly encourage, proceedings of which Col. Mildmay did not see fit to approve. Madame O'Neil and her son were his friends, too, it is true; and the baron was willing to serve them so far as he was able. He had served them up to a certain point; he had brought about the introduction; he had sought for and given them any information he had been able to procure on the subject of the young lady's fortune. Even still, he was, as we have seen, doing his best in a mild, safe way to serve the young man's interests. More than this could not be justly expected from a man whose rôle in life was to stand well with everybody, and never unnecessarily to lose a friend or even an acquaintance. To the baron, society was a stage upon which the actors were perpetually passing to and fro: this year, this set; next year, that. Many and many had been the dramas, the playing-out of which he had watched in his life. He was watching with interest the present little drama that was going on before his eyes; he was watching with interest the dying father, and the high-spirited pretty girl, and the jealous lovers, and the anxious mothers, and the daily fast-growing intricacies; and he, like everybody else, was puzzling his brain over what the end of it all was going to be. Of course, he had his sympathies and his inclinations, and his private wishes upon the subject. He had not put the notion of falling in love with Ethel into young O'Neil's head for nothing, and to be able to witness with complete un-

concern the collapse of his *protégé's* hopes and aspirations. If he could, without harm and without compromising his conscience, have given events a friendly push in the right direction, he would have been only too happy to do so; but more than this he had taken a firm resolve not to do. Common sense was loudly warning him; and common sense he had made up his mind to obey.

And so he conveniently recollected his musical appointment with the charming madame la comtesse, and announced with an anxious look at his watch, that he had not an instant to spare.

"As it is I shall be ten minutes late," he said. "*Au revoir! Mademoiselle, au revoir!* Do not expose your tender complexion to these burning rays any longer. Without a parasol, either! Return to shelter at once; pray do!" with which parting recommendation the old gentleman, himself safely sheltered by his huge white umbrella, trotted down the hill away.

But Miss Mildmay paid little attention to his advice. On the contrary, she stood motionless in the same spot, listening to the sound of his jaunty step upon the hard, sun-scorched road. And, even after it had ceased, she stood there still, thinking,—thinking of many things; thinking of how remarkably pleasant it was to be young and pretty, and admired and loved; thinking of how very amusing it was to have two lovers, an uncle and a nephew, whom a mortal feud divided, and yet who both met and mingled in a common love for her; thinking of what an irresistible and charming young lady she must be; thinking, too, of Sainte Barbe's chapel, and marvelling much whether, when to-morrow came, she would feel inclined to go and discover for herself whether early morning made of it such a delightful spot as Count O'Neil had said that it did. Yesterday, when she had met him there, she had forgotten to look at the poor little chapel at all, and had indeed, to tell the truth, been oblivious of its existence. But to-morrow, if she went—But would she go to-morrow? Why need she think about it yet? Time enough.

"Enough for the day was the evil thereof" was a favorite maxim of Ethel's. Sudden resolves were more to her liking than long ponderings, after which people invariably did precisely the same as though they had not thought at all: at least, such was her experience. And of late she was getting, in consequence, into rather a fatal habit of not thinking; of letting herself be drifted on by the current; of holding on to straws, so long as they would let her, and then clutch-

ing at something else. The current was rushing along rather fast now, and Ethel could not precisely see where it was leading her. "Somewhere," she supposed, rashly confiding in her strong youth and in the happiness which has as yet known no shadow or cloud. Other people could see the hovering cloud, day by day, sinking lower and lower, coming nearer and nearer; but she could not. Other people could see the Damocles' sword, which might so easily cut all involved knots, solve all puzzled questions, suspended above her head; but she alone was blind. Every one around her knew that her father's life was a mere matter of time; that, though to-day he was better, to-morrow he might be worse; that, in short, his doom was sealed. And everybody, too, was calculating upon it in his heart, as people must calculate upon such coming events as these, taking it into account for the future. Ah, it was a strange state of things! — death hovering visibly over busy life; sorrow stealthily stealing in and sitting down, side by side, with joy: but its cold shadow had not yet touched Ethel's heart. Unfamiliarity with grief makes us strangely blind. She was standing in the bright, warm sunshine still.

CHAPTER XIV.

THAT afternoon Ethel went to see Mademoiselle Delneuve.

"If only I had the luck of meeting the bridegroom elect there!" Miss Mildmay thought.

And, as it chanced, her wish was granted. M. Barbier was certainly not at all handsome. The baron's description was pretty exact: he was stout and short; and he wore a pair of tight trousers with a stripe on them, and a very bright tie.

A large bouquet of flowers, probably his offering, was in the centre of the table, illuminating the dark little room. It was easy to see that great events were impending; for different articles of dress in various stages of making were strewn about the apartment.

Christine looked a little pale, but not at all embarrassed. She would not hear of Miss Mildmay's running away, as Ethel, fearing that her visit was *mal à propos*, seemed half inclined to do.

"Mamma will show you some of my things," she said, adding, in a whisper, "Don't be in a hurry: he will go soon now; the time is nearly up."

And so Madame Delneuve, leaving the door open for propriety's sake, carried Ethel off to the next room, which was her bedroom, and where a fierce-eyed, black-haired Nicoise was hard at work over the *trousseau*.

"We are making it at home," Madame Delneuve explained; "and, though we are not rich, Christine shall have every thing that is needful. M. Barbier is most generous, and is giving her a handsome *corbeille*. But, of course, we are anxious to do our part too," she added with gentle pride.

Before long, a ponderous step passed the window. The clock had struck five, and M. Barbier had departed.

"He has gone," Christine announced, appearing from the other room; "and now I am yours."

And undoubtedly the announcement was made in a tone of relief.

"I am afraid that I interrupted — that I hurried M. Barbier away," Ethel said.

"Oh, dear, no! He went because it is five o'clock, and for no other reason. When the clock strikes ten to-morrow, he will come again. That is the rule. He pays me two visits a day, — morning and evening."

"Two visits a day! What a devoted admirer! So, if you quarrel in the morning, you can make it up in the evening," Ethel said rather satirically.

"Yes. But we never are foolish enough to quarrel, — not like some other people I know," retorted Christine, laughing.

"From what I hear, mademoiselle" — "Well, and what do you hear?" Ethel interrupted with a sudden flush. "*Qui se dispute s'adore*, you know, Christine."

It was the French girl's turn to color now.

"M. Barbier and I do not adore one another certainly," she said frankly; "yet I dare say that we shall jog along the road of life tolerably comfortably together."

Then they discussed the *trousseau*, — a safer subject. That necessary adjunct to marriage is a special godsend, a peculiar dispensation of Providence. To all women it is, if nothing more, a grateful distraction from graver concerns. In a Frenchwoman's mind, it occupies at least as much place as the marriage itself. Christine was eager and volatile on the subject. Over her silk dresses she grew quite excited; and her eyes lit up when she informed Ethel that her *corbeille* was to contain an Indian cashmere.

"It belonged to M. Barbier's mother,"

she explained; "but it is very handsome and tolerably fresh, and now it is to belong to me. Am I not a lucky girl?"

"Very," replied Ethel rather dryly. "And you are perfectly happy, mademoiselle, of course?"

"To be sure!"

Christine was peering anxiously at a little stain which she fancied she detected in one of the new gowns; but now she looked up suddenly, with a nervous little laugh.

"Ah! it is all Greek to you, I know," she said. "You can't understand it. M. Barbier is not young nor elegant like your admirers, — like Count O'Neil, for instance. Don't I know he is not? But he is fond of me, and I am grateful; and — there. That is all about it," she concluded with a shrug.

Ethel was mystified.

"You are a strange girl, Christine," she said frankly. "I don't know whether to like or detest you;" and she began gathering her things together as though she were about to leave.

Christine looked at her with a smile, — rather a tremulous one.

"Like me," she said a little pleadingly. "Please do!"

"I do like you. But —"

"And don't judge too rashly. I do not pretend to *love* M. Barbier; but he is kind and good, and I like him. Besides, this marriage presents many advantages. It will give me a home, and my mother too. She is always to live with us. That is agreed."

"A home?"

"Yes. Of course, you know that we are poor, — very poor; but what you don't know as I do by experience is, what a hard, difficult thing it is to accept the charitable kindnesses even of friends."

"Christine!"

"You don't know it? To be sure not. Mr. O'Neil is not a man to boast of his good deeds; but don't you remember that the first time I told you à propos of your admirer the count, that I would always take an interest in any one of the name of O'Neil? Then I did not know that he was, or pretended to be, the nephew of our friend and benefactor; for Mr. O'Neil is our benefactor. Some years ago, chance brought him to —, where we lived. Papa had met him once before in Paris, and had been able to render him some trifling service. My mother and I were also able to be of use to him; for at — he caught a fever, and we nursed him through it. And amply has he repaid us for any kindness which it was in our power to show him. When days of sorrow and trouble came

upon us, he stood by us when older friends failed. To his goodness and bounty I owe my life; for I fell into bad health, and would certainly have died, but that he forced us to accept the means of seeking a change of climate. Ah! mademoiselle, since ever I have known Mr. O'Neil, I have always loved, and I will always love, the Irish nation."

Ethel was amazed.

A little of this she had already known; for Mrs. O'Neil had told her of the origin of her son's friendship for the Delneuvés. But the old lady had always been rather dry and uncommunicative upon the subject; the fact being, that she was a little jealous of this same friendship, and of her son's stanch and steadfast gratitude to the two ladies.

"They were very kind to him, my dear," she had told her; "and no doubt I am uncommonly obliged to them. But then this romantic enthusiasm about — The father was in trade, little better than a shopkeeper, my dear, you know," she had explained with a mysterious nod.

And Ethel knew that it had cost the old lady a little effort to pay the Delneuvés the civility of a call.

"But Mr. O'Neil owes you much. It is only right that he should try to repay a little of it," she said after a pause of thoughtful astonishment.

"Ah! but how has he repaid it! — how delicately and generously!" replied Christine warmly. "I often think that there is more goodness in the world than people ever dream of or suspect. The baron has been good to us too, — after his fashion," she went on with a little laugh. "M. Barbier is a friend of his, and he introduced him to us, and has brought about the marriage. I am grateful to *all* my friends, — to Mr. O'Neil for my life, and to the baron for my husband. But it will be a comfort to have one's husband only to be grateful to in the future," she added in a lower tone.

Ethel had on her gloves now, and was ready to go. Suddenly she gave Christine a warm kiss on both cheeks.

"I can understand, at least half understand now," she said. "Yet, Christine, I would never, never, do as you are doing. I could not."

"Bah! Wait till you are tried. But you never will be tried. Lovers — the genuine article, I mean — will never fail you: your only difficulty will be to pick and choose between them. Ah! you are a lucky girl. Do you know, that if I were inclined to hatred and envy, — which, thank Heaven! I am not, — I might perhaps hate and envy you?"

"Me! And I sometimes believe that I am the most miserable creature on earth." And Ethel began with a sigh, and ended with a laugh.

Christine laughed too; but all at once she grew grave.

"Yes, you are a lucky girl," she repeated; "and if you were a sensible one, — which, by the way, I strongly doubt, — you would thank God for your good fortune."

"Good fortune! What good fortune, pray?" Ethel inquired, opening her eyes.

"I hear that Mr. O'Neil admires you," Christine said abruptly, and giving her a keen look.

"Admires me — what nonsense! The baron's foolish tattle." But Ethel blushed furiously.

"Not the baron's tattle only. Mr. O'Neil talked of you the other day, — often talks of you, in short. My mother and I both think — but I will not say what we think."

"Say away;" and Ethel tried to look supremely careless and indifferent.

"No, no! I have no desire to betray confidence, or to penetrate secrets. My own affairs are enough for me."

"I have no secrets," Ethel asserted stoutly; but her conscious looks belied her words.

"At all events, I have no desire to know them. Nevertheless, I have, as you are aware, a turn for preaching; and I must give you a word or two of advice. I know Mr. O'Neil, and can give him a character. He is good and charming, and" —

"Well?" Ethel was at the door now, indeed half out of it; but she popped her head in with a mocking, yet slightly anxious smile.

"Well, don't be a fool! There is my sermon for you," Christine said.

"Thank you! You think the advice necessary; do you?" And Ethel was gone with one of her merry laughs.

It was late, almost dinner-hour already, and there was no time to lose. Ethel hastened homewards. The sun was setting in a golden, quivering sea. In the distance snowy peaks were blushing in the crimson glow. The daily-recurring pageant of Nature's lavish splendor was taking place in serene magnificence, all careless and disdainful of the puny, busy world's coldness and indifference. The world was indeed occupied after its usual fashion, sauntering in gayly-bedizened groups up and down the eternal Promenade. Ethel, only accompanied by her maid, avoided the crowded path, where acquaintances might be met, and took the less frequented side of the

road; but her eyes wandered across now and then; and once the sound of familiar voices made her pause.

They were laughing very pleasantly and merrily. One of the voices belonged to Count O'Neil, who stood in the midst of a little knot of lively ladies and gentlemen. Amongst the ladies Ethel recognized the pretty and perfectly dressed Madame de Courcelles, the hostess of last night, who, report said, counted Ernest O'Neil as one of her many courtiers and admirers. It was an idle and meaningless report, as Ethel knew very well. The young man had, it is true, followed the fashion of the moment, and had in the beginning of the season *affiché* himself as one of the beautiful and fashionable Madame de Courcelles' adorers. But it was a harmless, conventional sort of adoration,—one of those little practices which are as a matter of course allowed in, and even necessitated by, foreign society, and had never caused Miss Mildmay so much as a qualm of displeasure. Yet this evening, somehow or other, she did experience a momentary pang; and a sudden chill and tightening came to her heart as she hurried past unseen out of reach of the sound of that gay, careless laughter, and remembered the half-promised meeting at Ste. Barbe's chapel next morning.

Mrs. O'Neil came into her room as she was changing her dress for dinner.

"Arthur insists upon going away to-morrow," she announced. "Did you ever hear of any thing so ridiculous and provoking?"

"Very ridiculous," Miss Mildmay replied. "And so I am not to see him again; am I?" she inquired after a little pause.

"Not if you are always gadding about, and never at home when he comes, child," replied the old lady shortly.

"I was at home to-day," Miss Mildmay replied, opening her sunny eyes.

"But you had not a word to say to him, or to anybody but that cackling old baron. And then you ran away and hid yourself: you know you did, child!"

"I thought Mr. O'Neil came to see you," Ethel said demurely: "he always says he does, at all events."

"And why should he not, child? Why should a young man be ashamed of coming to see his old mother? To be sure he comes to see me; but — You look very nice in that white gown, child, — very nice indeed. You ought always to wear white, I think. Ah! there is the dinner-bell. By the way, Arthur said that he would perhaps drop in this evening. Perhaps he will, and perhaps he won't. But if he really is going to-morrow, of course it is natural that he

should wish to see as much of me as he can," the old lady said, giving Ethel a sly, searching look.

"Of course; quite natural," Miss Mildmay responded innocently.

And then the two ladies went down amiably, arm in arm, to dinner.

CHAPTER XV.

AND of course Mr. O'Neil did come. Ethel was, as usual, wandering about the avenue, looking like a white spirit in the moonlight, when he came upon her, disturbing her meditations rather abruptly; for, though she fully expected him to come, he was rather earlier this evening than usual.

"He is good and charming. Don't be a fool!"

The odd, abrupt words of Christine's sermon were ringing in her ears at the very moment that she saw him within a yard or two of her. Miss Mildmay was not, as we know, addicted to the prudent habit of weighing her words before uttering them; and when Mr. O'Neil smilingly inquired the cause of her grave, puzzled looks, and what her thoughts were about, she told him frankly.

"I wonder why on earth you let Christine Delneuve marry that horrid M. Barbier," she said.

With great deliberation Mr. O'Neil lit a fresh cigar before replying.

"Do you?" he said then, rather dryly. "You are wrong to call poor Barbier 'horrid,' though. He is a very good fellow."

"But she does not love him, Mr. O'Neil, — not the least bit."

"Oh! that is it; is it?" with a calm puff.

Ethel stopped short, turning round on him suddenly.

"Mr. O'Neil, you don't mean to say that you do not believe in love?" she demanded with a withering look.

He burst out laughing. "I suppose I do. I have not thought much about it." Then, with a half-smothered sigh, "I have had other things to think of in my life," he added quickly.

"Other things! — money, I suppose, and hatred and revenge and —"

"And justice," he said quietly, as she paused breathless, and a little frightened at her own audacity.

There was a brief silence. They were

both standing quite still, listening to the night-breezes shivering gently through the trees. They were chill breezes, and suddenly Ethel shivered from head to foot herself.

" You are cold. Why do you come out with your head uncovered ? " Mr. O'Neil inquired, perceiving that her hair was gleaming in the moonlight.

" Is it uncovered ? I forgot my hat. I had better go in, I think."

But he would not hear of it. " Make a turban of this," he pleaded eagerly. " It is an Indian shawl of my mother's, which I found amongst my traps. I was bringing it up to her."

Ethel shrugged her shoulders and laughed; but she obeyed, for all that, winding the soft blue - and - gold - embroidered stuff with careless grace round and round her head. It became her well, as she saw clearly enough in his eyes.

" And so you really do not believe in love, Mr. O'Neil ? " this incorrigible young lady inquired abruptly, yet very demurely. " Do you know that I actually do ? "

They had turned away from the house again, and Mr. O'Neil was secure of one other turn at all events. Perhaps it was this that made him reply with considerable dryness, " I dare say you do. Most young ladies of your age do, — or fancy they do," he added with a little laugh.

" Fancy they do ! " with extreme indignation. " Mr. O'Neil " —

" Well ! "

" You are a heathen, Mr. O'Neil ; and I do not care what you say or think. But for my part I pity Christine Delneuve from the bottom of my heart," she said, becoming suddenly shy, and nervous of personal observation.

" Pity is a cheap form of benevolence. I seldom indulge in it."

Perhaps he only wanted to rouse her, and to enjoy the pleasure of seeing her eyes flash lightning at him. They did literally flash at this.

" People who have no heart find it easy to sneer at every thing," she observed in a cutting tone.

All at once his manner changed again. " Forgive me ! I was only jesting," he said with sudden gravity. " I am very fond of the Delneuves, — very fond indeed ; and am, too, a great deal more interested in their happiness and welfare than you can be, Miss Mildmay. They are old friends of mine ; and once they were very kind to me, — when I chanced to fall ill at — . It was a fever I had, which, but for their good nursing and care, would probably have

killed me. I had met Delneuve in London some years before ; and when chance brought me to — , when I was making a tour through France, the acquaintance was renewed. As I tell you, I caught a fever there, through which his wife and daughter nursed me with a kindness which I can never forget. So you see that I have reason to be grateful to them, and to take their affairs to heart ; which indeed I do. But I cannot see with your eyes. I confess to you, Miss Mildmay, that I was very glad to hear that Christine was about to make a good marriage."

" A good marriage ! " Ethel repeated disdainfully.

" Well, it is an unromantic term, I know ; but consider they are very poor, and, though I grant that Barbier is not handsome, I know him to be a thoroughly good fellow, and very fond of her. Don't be alarmed. Christine is a sensible girl, and a free agent ; and what she is doing will turn out to be the right thing in the end."

" Perhaps so."

" You are not convinced, I see," he went on, laughing. " But perhaps experience will convince even you, some day, that the romance of life is one thing, and the working part of it another."

" I hope not," Miss Mildmay replied with considerable scorn.

Her companion gave her a keen, curious, smiling glance. All at once his face and manner changed then completely.

" You consider me a heathen ; do you, Miss Mildmay ? " he said quickly and with a sudden earnestness. " Well, you are quite in the wrong. I do believe in all good things, — love amongst them. I believe in it with all my heart. But you are nineteen, you see, and I am forty ; and naturally we contemplate the same object from a somewhat different point of view," he concluded a little vaguely.

It was a strange and uncalled-for profession of faith ; and it seemed rather to disconcert Miss Mildmay, who again announced her intention of entering the house. This time Mr. O'Neil made no opposition, though he remained behind himself to finish his cigar.

Mrs. O'Neil was just rousing herself from her nap as she entered the room.

" Bless my soul ! " she exclaimed, rubbing her eyes, and staring. " What has the child got on her head ? "

" Oh ! I forgot. It is a shawl of yours. Mr. O'Neil made me put it on."

And they would not allow her to take it off in a hurry.

" Come over, child ! " the old lady ordered.

"Let us have a look at you. Does she not look nice, colonel,—quite like a sultana, or something of that sort? Upon my word, you *are* a pretty girl," she concluded, with an approving nod.

"Am I?"

And Miss Mildmay contemplated the sultana head-dress in the opposite mirror. It was a fact. She was a pretty girl.

"And so Arthur is here; is he?" proceeded Mrs. O'Neil. "Where on earth can he have found that old shawl, I wonder? I have not laid my eyes on it for a hundred years."

Presently Mr. O'Neil himself appeared to explain.

"It managed, somehow, to get amongst my things," he said. "I was packing up, and found it, and this box also,—trinkets I believe they are. I thought you might like to have them."

"Show them to me. Ah, yes! They were given to me on my wedding-day," said the old lady, opening the case tenderly. "They are old-fashioned, to be sure, but pretty things in their way. Rococo I believe they call them. Blue, too, like the scarf. I used to wear them, I remember, when I was young. What can Flaherty have been thinking about to bring them away with us? I thought they were all safe at home at Mount Druid."

"A wedding-present!—were they really?" Ethel asked curiously.

"Yes. They were my mother's, and she gave them to me. Let me put them on you, child, and see how they look. The color matches the scarf exactly."

Ethel had no objection to allowing herself to be decked out. Gayly she knelt down before the old lady, and let her fasten the quaint, heavy chains upon her neck, and put the long pendent ear-rings into her ears.

"They look very nice," Mrs. O'Neil said complacently, when she had finished her work, and the girl had stood up again,— "very nice indeed. All they want is a good cleaning. Do you know I have a mind to give them to you, child? they suit you so well. I always intended to give them to Arthur's wife, when he got one; but, upon my word, I am tired of waiting for that," she said in a melancholy tone, and with a reproachful glance at her son. "And so you may keep them, child, if you like."

"Oh, no! I must not deprive Mr. O'Neil's,"— Then she paused suddenly, with a constrained little laugh.

Looks of admiration were nothing novel to Ethel; but the quick flame which had

darted into Mr. O'Neil's eyes at his mother's words startled her for an instant. She was standing in the midst of them all, with her white dress and fantastic turban and ornaments, and the little pause which followed was an awkward one. Mr. O'Neil broke it at last.

"Pray keep them, Miss Mildmay," he said, smiling. "I renounce all claims in your favor."

She made no reply, but slowly, and with a sudden gravity, proceeded to take off her gay trappings one by one.

"I'll have them cleaned and brightened up for you, child," said Mrs. O'Neil, who evidently considered the matter settled.

"But"—began Ethel doubtfully.

"Don't say another word," interrupted Mrs. O'Neil, puckering her fair, creaseless forehead. "They are mine to do with as I like; are they not? and I choose to give them to you. To be sure, I had always intended them for Arthur's wife; but, bless me! I will be in my grave before —

"That personage is a myth," interrupted Mr. O'Neil with a quick, impatient laugh. "For Heaven's sake, mother, do not wait for her appearance to dispose of your ornaments."

"Well, you know, Arthur, that, if you liked, you could"—she began plaintively; and then, as her son frowned and gave unmistakable symptoms of displeasure—"What were you saying about packing up?" she demanded sharply. "You don't mean to say that you are really going away-to-morrow!" she said, affecting a tone of as much aggrieved astonishment as if he had not, twenty times over, informed her of his intentions.

"Yes, to-morrow;" but he said it a little faintly.

"Wait another day, Arthur," she said coaxingly. "Now, is it not aggravating of him, Ethel, to insist upon going? And Heaven knows what may happen," she broke out plaintively, "when you are gone. Somebody may die, or"— And then suddenly remembering the colonel, and the significance which might be given to her words, "At my age one never knows the moment," she said hurriedly and in a melancholy tone.

But her son only laughed at her; and Ethel shuddered and shivered, and begged of her not to suggest such gloomy ideas. "Partings are gloomy things, though," she said. "Why do you leave your mother, Mr. O'Neil?" she inquired curiously.

"Heaven only knows, child," broke in the old lady. "My firm belief is, that he is going because he said he would go, and

he is ashamed to change his mind. But perhaps if you would ask him," she said, as though a bright idea had struck her. " Irishmen can never refuse a lady, you know."

" Oh ! but " — and Ethel's eyelashes drooped over her violet eyes. " Irishmen are gallant, then ; are they ? " she inquired playfully.

" Gallant ! — they are the bravest, finest, most chivalrous men in the wide world," cried Mrs. O'Neil enthusiastically. " If I were a young girl again — if I were you, child, I would not marry any man but an Irishman ! — no, not for twenty thousand a year."

They all laughed at the old lady's patriotism.

" I — I rather like Irishmen certainly," Miss Mildmay observed with a demure, shy smile ; thinking, no doubt, of Sainte Barbe's chapel and of Count O'Neil.

But she was thinking of somebody else too, — of Count O'Neil's uncle, — wondering with a half-flattered, half-frightened flutter of her silly heart, what that odd look she had seen five minutes ago in his eyes could possibly have meant. What did it mean ? Nobody could say, not even himself. For was she not nineteen, and he forty ? And was she not a silly, beautiful, gay, distracting butterfly, and he a grave, sober, sensible, practical mortal, who had other things to think of besides love and romance ? Why or wherefore was a mystery. But after all Mrs. O'Neil triumphantly gained her point. Before he left the villa that evening, he had consented to delay his journey a little longer.



CHAPTER XVI.

BUT there were transient gleams of sunshine, uncertain intervals of calmness, in spite of which the villa was in a chronic state of disquiet, and threatening storm. Everybody knew it and felt it, from the master down to the last servant. Everybody knew and felt, that, beneath the calm surface of the monotony of daily life, an under-current of troubled waters existed, and that the air was heavy with domestic thunder.

The storm broke the very next morning. It was early still when Mrs. O'Neil knocked at Ethel's door, looking fluttered and anxious. " My dear, I want to speak to you," she began.

Miss Mildmay knew at once what was coming. " Well ? " she demanded, metaphorically speaking, donning her armor for the fray.

" My dear, don't look so terrible, — just as if you were going to eat me up. It is nothing, only — your dear papa is a little anxious about you, my love. He saw you going out early, and now you have only just come in ; and — you look so hot and excited, child." And the old lady was quite nervous and excited herself.

" Yes, it is true. I have been out, and I have only just come in. Well, and what of it ? " Miss Mildmay inquired loftily.

" My dear, your papa is delicate ; and delicate people worry themselves, you see." And then it all came out with a rush. " O Ethel ! surely you are not silly enough to want to keep friends with those people, — those *dreadful* people ? " she inquired with a gasp.

" What people ? "

But Ethel knew as little how to beat about the bush as Mrs. O'Neil herself.

" You mean your daughter-in-law and her son, I suppose," she went on tremulously. " Did papa tell you to speak to me on the subject ? " she inquired with suppressed anger.

" Come over here, child ; come over here ! Yes, he did. He says, that, unless you can be got to see things sensibly and reasonably, he must leave Nice at once. And just think what a pity that would be," she added coaxingly, " when the place agrees with him so well."

Ethel colored. " Papa has never yet made plans without consulting me," she said bitterly.

" My dear, he has not made any plans. He only — child, what were you doing this morning, what were you doing the other day, when you stopped out such an age, and kept us all waiting ? Ethel, that woman is a clever woman, but she is a bad woman too ; and if she is trying to make a fool of you — "

" A fool of me ! But she is not. I have not seen her this long time, if you mean Madame O'Neil," Ethel interrupted with a slightly scornful laugh.

" You have not ? Then it was all imagination ! " cried Mrs. O'Neil in a tone of delighted relief. " I knew your poor papa was fretting and worriting himself about nothing at all. I knew that you were a good, sensible girl, and that — I will run and tell him this very minute ; " and she rose from her seat, and began bustling out of the room.

Ethel let her reach the door. Perhaps,

the girl was struggling with a momentary temptation to deceit; perhaps Mrs. O'Neil's vivacity confused her, and deprived her for an instant of the power of speech. But, if so, it was a short struggle, a brief hesitation. Deception was as foreign to Ethel's nature as want of words was to her tongue.

"Mrs. O'Neil," she said, following her, "wait a moment. What is it that you are going to tell papa?"

"Not to worry himself, child. I am going to tell him that you are a good girl, and that you have not seen those people lately, and that he need not be uneasy about"—

"But that would not be true," Ethel interrupted shortly. "It so happens that I have not seen Madame O'Neil very lately; but I have met her son two or three times. I met him this morning."

Mrs. O'Neil's sudden change of countenance was ludicrous.

"Her son, her son! Bless me, child!" She was speechless.

"Yes. I had a walk with him this morning. It was very pleasant," Ethel said in her coolest tones.

Mrs. O'Neil held up her hands. "My goodness, my goodness!" she exclaimed. "What are girls coming to? Upon my word, child, I am astonished at you,—quite astonished; and with a foreign coxcomb of the sort too! They say he is quite a foreigner," she added, half curiously, half indignantly.

"Well, he is something of a foreigner certainly," Ethel acknowledged with a half-laugh. "But that is nothing against him surely. Your grandson speaks English perfectly."

"My grandson! Hold your tongue, child! He is no more my grandson than you are my grandmother!" cried Mrs. O'Neil, growing quiet red and excited. But she cooled down at once.

"Ethel," she said reproachfully, "you are a giddy, foolish girl; and you ought to know better than to displease your poor papa, when—when"—But she had not the courage to finish the phrase. "And now," she went on hurriedly, after a brief hesitation, "even if he were my grandson,—which he is not,—but even if he were—I wonder at you, child, upon my word! I wonder at you, for having any thing to say to such low people. Why, don't you know that the woman was my maid,—my servant? Don't you know, that, at the present moment, her sister, the mother of this young fellow with whom you think fit to walk and make appointments,—don't you know, child, that she is a servant too,

—Lord O'Neil's housekeeper,—his own keeper rather, and married to his steward?"

Ethel winced. These blunt questions reminded her, indeed, of nothing new; but they reminded her vividly of what were at least unpleasant facts, which, somehow, she gave herself pains to keep out of sight, and forgot. But the very pain which they caused her made her the more determined to conceal that they caused her any pain at all.

"I don't know any thing," she replied with quick rising temper, "except that I am not a person to change like a weather-cock; and, if I am prevented seeing my friends at home, what can I do but see them elsewhere?"

And so no good resulted from this explosion; indeed, much harm. Mrs. O'Neil was totally unfit for, and unequal to, the task her kind heart had so rashly undertaken, and was about as capable of curbing a wild young prairie-horse as of reducing Ethel to a tame submission to her father's wishes. She was abruptly beginning to suspect something of the sort herself now, and, poor old lady! left the girl's room, wringing her hands with a feeling of impotent despair.

"Did ever a prettier, gentler face belong to a more audacious, headstrong young woman?" she asked herself over and over again during the next half-hour, while holding painful debate what was the right thing to do next. It was a difficult question; and, with the best intentions, Mrs. O'Neil answered it badly. She could not bring herself to go back at once to the colonel, and tell him the result of her mission. She could not bear to inflict pain a moment too soon upon him. She feared for his health. She dreaded the anger which she might arouse, and the determination to leave Nice at once,—than which nothing would be, perhaps, more injurious to him,—which his daughter's behavior would very probably provoke. Like all good-natured people, Mrs. O'Neil was inclined to procrastination. She could not bear to evoke a hurricane. She could not bear to drive either people or events to extremities. "Thank goodness! Arthur has not gone yet," she thought, catching eagerly in her perplexity at any straw of help. "At all events, I need do nothing till I see him. Dear me, dear me! What an old fool I am, to be sure! Last night I actually fancied that the saucy minx was condescending to take a fancy to him; and now to think of her galivanting about the country with that impudent young fellow, Denis Irwin's son!

She will tell us that she wants to marry him next! What on earth ever induced me to meddle in the business at all?" she inquired of herself with a rueful groan.

What, indeed? Ethel was pondering over the same query in her own room, waiting in tremulous, excited expectation for what was to happen next. There was but the one thing to happen, she supposed; and for this she was uerving herself as best she could. Of course, Mrs. O'Neil would at once tell her father what had occurred, and he would come to her, or send for her, and there would be an angry scene, and sharp words and recriminations, and stormy explanations, and after this— But imagination could carry her no farther. Ethel loved her father with her whole heart; and the thought of seriously offending him, of going in direct opposition to his will, was as yet only lurking in her mind, and had not assumed a definite or tangible shape. In her heart she felt, though for all the world she would not, even to herself, have acknowledged it, that if, in the end, he would not give in, she must do so; and that though up to a certain point resistance was possible,— nay, even for the sake of her own self-respect and pride; necessary,— resistance in the long-run must yield.

There it was. Things were going badly; but all was not lost. She was not in earnest,—in downright earnest yet. She liked Count O'Neil: at least she believed that she did; but, for all that, this morning she was by no means prepared to make a deliberate choice between him and her father. It was one thing to amuse one's self, and to flirt, and even to make and to keep secret appointments, and to play the part of heroine in a kind of little sensational drama, and to protest against the injustice and caprice of which she considered herself the victim; and quite another seriously to defy her father's authority, and to refuse positively to obey him. It was the critical moment of her life; and a timely counsel, or a judicious counsel, or a loving word, would have saved her. But, alas! they did not come; and the girl was left to fight her battle alone.

Or rather, not alone; far worse, indeed, than alone: for Ethel had giddily played with and sought temptation and danger, and to-day temptation and danger turned upon her, and played with and sought for her.

What was to happen next? Miss Mildmay was quite wrong, as we have seen, in her surmises; and her father, in ignorance still of the reality of his anxiety and fear, did not come to seek her, and give her the

opportunity of repairing the mistakes of the past, for which, perhaps, she was waiting. Ethel was prepared for a conflict; but none came. She was ready for a "scene," and the consequences of a scene,—tears, submission, reconciliation; but alas, alas! it seemed as though her father was avoiding and distrusting her, and, by his cold displeasure and distrust, was resolved to drive her to extremities.

Where was she to turn? That very morning Count O'Neil had implored of her to turn to his mother. Madame O'Neil was longing to see her and to help her, he had only an hour or two ago told her, during that pleasant walk the young people had taken together.

Not, indeed, that they had spoken very much or very seriously of the future. Count O'Neil had, it is true, once or twice attempted to approach the subject; but his fair companion had been more or less discouraging. She would not hear of the future. It bored her, she said. Could it not be let take care of itself? and could they not enjoy the present, and be content? What more did they want? She, for her part, wanted nothing more; and when Count O'Neil told her that he wanted to marry her, and to see his way towards accomplishing that object, this provoking but strangely attractive damsel assumed a total want of comprehension of his meaning, and assured him, that, if he would persist in talking of such unpleasant topics, she would go home on the spot.

And so the young man, nothing loath perhaps, let her have her own way. Lovers proverbially affect the clouds, and are apt to find common sense—in talk at least—to too earthly by half. The truth was, that Count O'Neil's eyes, as little as Ethel's own, were capable of piercing the future; and though readily enough he could make vague projects, and fervent declarations, and belligerent threats, he really did not know how to make a single practical suggestion, or to throw any efficient light on the situation. It was his mother who was to do all that. In her resources he had unlimited confidence. She could find the key of any difficulty; she could surmount any obstacle; and though an uncomfortable instinct warned him that he had better conceal from his lady-love how entirely he leant upon, and, indeed, was still in all important matters tied to his mother's apron-strings, he had yet succeeded in impressing upon her mind that her good offices might well be of some avail in smoothing the difficult path which lay before them, and of suggesting to her that Madame O'Neil

might possibly find the elew of extrication from the present *imbroglio*.

Ethel recollectcd this now. She had given Count O'Neil a sort of half-promise that she would, if possible, go to see his mother soon. And now the thought occurred to her to go to her at once,—this very day, this very hour. She felt in a defiant mood, and ready to brave the worst. She had been prepared for a passage of arms with her father; and, since he had shirked the encounter, an outlet must be found for her superfluous energy and excitement. And yet when she had actually dressed herself and gone out, and found herself close to the house in which Madame O'Neil dwelt, a strange hesitation and reluctance seized upon her, and she paused and almost turned away again. Something, she was ashamed to say what, was deterring her. An unpleasant thought, which she could not silence, was forcing itself upon her mind. She struggled against it, and tried to despise it, but it was there still; and while she was struggling and hesitating and debating whether to go forward, or to retrace her steps, decision came upon her unawares. Madame O'Neil herself appeared within a few yards of her. It was a very natural little circumstance; for Madame O'Neil resided upon the Promenade, and Ethel had been standing almost right in front of her windows,—had, indeed, been seen from them. Yet both ladies either felt or affected surprise at the meeting; and Ethel involuntarily drew back, and would perhaps, if she had obeyed her first impulse, have run away. But Madame O'Neil had already possession of her hand, which she was gently stroking; and she was smiling at her with affectionate solicitude, and seemed in no wise inclined to allow her to escape.

"What is the matter, little one?" she was inquiring anxiously. "You look sad, troubled, *bouleversée*. Have, then, the cares of the world come upon you, too, already?"

It was true. She had once been a waiting-maid, a servant; but she was Madame la Comtesse O'Neil now, and she was handsome and ladylike and well dressed. Moreover, she was kindly and sympathetic; and the girl badly needed kindness and sympathy just then. After all, it only cost her a moment's struggle, to which madame la comtesse was not, perhaps, so blind as she pretended to be.

"And I, too, have my grievances," she went on, half playfully, half reproachfully. "It is such an age since I have seen you, dear child! I may confess it to you, I have

been afraid that you meant to give us up, — me up, at least," she added with a meaning smile.

Ethel colored. "I could not help it, madame," she said hastily. "I could not, indeed."

"Poor little one! I know it. I was only jesting. Ernest has told me all." And Madame O'Neil fondly patted her hand. "Poor little one!" she repeated tenderly.

An opportune kind word works miracles: it is the *sesame* which undoes the bars and bolts of hearts. Ethel's heart melted then. Her reserve and constraint vanished. She suddenly burst into tears. She wept for some time; and her companion comforted her with soft nothings as best she could,—comforted her till the tears were dried up, and she was smiling, or trying to smile again.

"I am very foolish," she said deprecatingly; "but I have been worried and unhappy, and I am still unhappy, I believe," she added in a funny little tone of indecision, as though she were not quite sure about it.

Madame O'Neil, however, assumed the unhappiness to be a fact, and wished to know more about it. Soon, indeed, she knew enough,—every thing, indeed.

"And now papa is threatening to leave Nee at once," Ethel concluded dolefully, "unless — unless"— And she could not bring herself to say the words.

But the sentence was finished for her. "Unless you give up Ernest," Madame O'Neil said after a thoughtful pause. "And what of my brother-in-law, Arthur?" she inquired then suddenly and with a keen look.

So suddenly, that Ethel was a little taken aback. "About him?" she repeated.

"Yes. Does he remain much longer in Nice? Your father wishes you to marry him, perhaps?" Madame O'Neil said coldly and abruptly.

Ethel was indignant. "To marry Mr. O'Neil!" she exclaimed. "Nonsense! Nobody is thinking of such a thing. He is going away immediately: at least, he was to have gone to-day; but I believe that he has put it off," she said with a little half-conscious laugh. "Why do you suppose that papa wants me to marry him?" she inquired in a flutter.

But Madame O'Neil was mysterious, and would not give a direct answer. She only shook her head, and said almost playfully,— "And now, dear child, which is it to be, the uncle, or the nephew?"

"It is no jesting matter, madame," Ethel replied stiffly. "Jesting! Am I jesting? Indeed, no.

I was never more serious in my life. Well, then, since it displeases you, I will say no more about my brother-in-law. It would be a cruel sacrifice, and it may be that I wrong your father in supposing him capable of demanding it. Ethel dearest, I was only jesting so far as *your* feelings are concerned. I know well enough that Ernest has been fortunate enough to win your affections. When will you marry him?"

"When?" And Ethel looked frightened and startled. "O madame! how do I know? I know nothing. Papa will never consent."

"Never! Never is a long word. But surely you mean to marry him; do you not?"

"I suppose so. I—I have not thought about it," Ethel faltered.

"You have not thought about it? Come, dear child. If it were Ernest, not I, who was here, you would be hardly cruel enough to say that; and I know well that I am but a poor substitute for him. Have I startled you by my abruptness? But what you tell me about your leaving Nice has alarmed me. Once you leave, without being definitely and openly engaged, the difficulties will increase tenfold. Then, indeed, you may well say that your father will never consent. Ernest may never have the chance of ever seeking you again. Your father and yourself will fall more and more under the influence of those who are not our friends. You will become strangers to us."

"But—but—what is to be done? What can I do?" Ethel inquired in a tone of despair.

"Ask your father for his consent. He can refuse you nothing. If you wish, Ernest will write to him this very day."

The girl shook her head. "It would be useless," she murmured,—"useless."

"And why, pray?" asked Madame O'Neil coldly.

"Because—because—oh! he is prejudiced against him. It would be useless," Ethel said despondingly.

"But he loves you. If you told him that your happiness depended upon it."

"I will try,—I will tell him so,—I will implore of him!" the girl said with a sudden flash of hopefulness. "When will Count O'Neil write?" she asked timidly.

"At once, to-morrow,—when you like."

Ethel was frightened. "Not so soon,—not for a day or two. Papa is not very well just now," she pleaded nervously. "Perhaps he will consent. Who knows? One never can know till one tries." But then a sudden conviction pierced her

brain. "Oh, he never will!—I know that he will not," she groaned.

Her companion gazed upon her in thoughtful silence. Intimately, indeed, did she know that Col. Mildmay would never of his free will allow such a marriage; and she marvelled at Ethel's folly in imagining even for a moment such a possibility.

"And if he does not consent?" she inquired presently, giving the young girl a slow, long look.

"It will be dreadful,—dreadful!"

Miss Mildmay's mental capacities could carry her no farther. There was another little pause.

"Then there remains only one alternative," Madame O'Neil said then very quietly and calmly. "If persuasion fail, force must be used. He must be made to consent."

"Madame!"

"Yes: he must be made to consent," repeated Madame O'Neil vehemently. "Is your happiness, is my son's happiness, to be sacrificed to calumny and foul suspicion? Do I not well know what the meaning of it all is? Until an evil wind brought those false and lying relations of ours to Nee, all was going well. Your father encouraged Ernest's attentions. Our acquaintance was sought and courted. My son was your inseparable companion and open admirer. What was the cause of the change? They came to blacken and malign us with their invented tale of wickedness, which can and will never be proved. *I care not*: the end will compensate for all to me. But the end is delayed. It cannot be very far off; but it may not be very near: and meanwhile is your happiness, is Ernest's happiness, to be sacrificed? No! that is not justice: it is nothing but cruelty and tyranny."

She spoke with quick excitement, and her pale cheeks flushed. It was one of those sudden and rare explosions of passion which now and then broke down the usual steady composure of her manner, and which both amazed and startled one all at once.

Ethel was frightened. "It is not my fault," she murmured.

"Dear child, I know it is not. Do I not know it well? But those whose fault it is must be punished. They must suffer, not you, who are blameless. Ernest will propose to your father for your hand to-morrow. If he grants his consent, well and good; but, if he does not, then you must act without it."

"What do you mean?" And Ethel

jumped to her feet, and looked as if the next moment she would run away.

Madame O'Neil laughed, and caught hold of her hand. "My dear child, I don't mean any thing so dreadful, so terrible. I don't mean an elopement, a scandal, for instance. Ernest would enjoy that as little as you would. What I mean is a very simple thing. It is an idea which has just flitted through my brain. Let us think about it. I mean that you should come to me for a day or two, and that you should write to your father to tell him that you will not return home unless he gives his consent to your marriage with the man you love. That is what I mean. Nothing so very shocking; is it? Ernest can go away to the club, to a hotel, — any place. Believe me, that your father will yield quickly enough if he finds out that you really are in earnest."

Ethel's eyes were fixed upon the ground. "Poor papa! It would break his heart," she said thoughtfully.

"That you should come to stay with me for twenty-four hours! *Mon Dieu!* Hearts are not broken so lightly. It does not break your heart that he persists against your will in imposing guests on you whom you do not like; that you, whose slightest desire was law, are now thwarted and opposed, as you have yourself just now told me, on every occasion."

Ethel winced, and withdrew her hand a little hastily. She had said something of the sort, it is true; but it is a different thing to say a thing one's self and to hear another repeat it. It is a very different thing to allow a murmur to escape us in a moment of irritation and temper, and to hear that murmur commented and enlarged upon to the prejudice of those we love. So she said warmly and jealously,—

"Papa is as fond of me as ever. He adores me. I would not grieve him for all the world."

"Then what do you mean to do?" inquired Madame O'Neil shortly.

"I don't know,—oh! I don't know;" and Ethel moved away. "It is time enough to think when the time comes, when"—

"You mean when Ernest proposes. But can you expect a young man to propose for the pleasure of being refused?" asked Madame O'Neil indignantly. "Ah, how heartless you young girls are!"

"But he will not be refused. He — I — madame, you know that"—

"I know that he loves you: you know it too. He has told you so often that he loves you, that your ears must know the tale off by heart; but how do I know?—

Ethel, dear child, *do you* love him? really love him, — well enough to sacrifice something, to dare something, for his sake? Cowardly, passive, inactive love is worth nothing: it is not love at all. Ethel, do you love him?"

Madame O'Neil held her hand prisoner again, so tightly that the girl could not, even if she had wished, withdraw it. Did she love him? She was trying to ask herself the question, trying to find an answer: but no answer came; at least, none escaped her in words. But, though she was silent, she colored violently,—a crimson, eloquent blush.

Madame O'Neil smiled, and drew her down to her and kissed her forehead. She was answered and satisfied. "Dear child," she whispered, "forgive me: I was wrong to doubt you, even for a moment, — to suppose that you were a girl of the common stamp, to whom a man's affections are mere playthings to be trifled with. I trust you, Ernest trusts you," she added significantly.

"You may trust me," the girl replied; and then gently but determinedly she freed her hand, and turned away. "Good-by, madame: it is getting late."

"And you will think of my little plan, will you not, if every thing else fails, you know?" Madame O'Neil said eagerly.

"Yes, I will think of it. Good-by," the girl repeated, without looking round, as she walked away.

Walked away with a quick, determined step, which said as distinctly as possible, that it must not be detained or pursued. Madame O'Neil gazed after her slender, erect figure, so quickly receding from view, with a perplexed and not too well pleased expression in her face. What did her sudden departure mean? What was the secret of her abrupt and strange behavior? Madame la comtesse was puzzled and annoyed, and felt a little bit disconcerted too. The young girl's proud and haughty ways disconcerted her: her capriciously changeable manners suggested a problem or two to her mind. She admired her: she could not help that, nor feel surprised at her son's passion. But she was not quite sure whether she liked her or not, or whether the game she was playing was worth the candle it cost, — perhaps not.

The English girl's fortune was probably large; but its exact amount had never been distinctly ascertained; and her son, with his good looks and splendid prospects, might find as much elsewhere. Ethel was a prize, it is true; but then the world contained other prizes, and the Frenchwoman

was bold and aspiring, and confident in her own success. But though for the first time to-day contemplating the prospect of affairs, Madame O'Neil began to doubt whether, on the whole, she had cause to be grateful to Baron de Nérac for his effective interference in her son's matrimonial concerns, it never occurred to her to retire vanquished from the field, or to induce him to retreat before the unforeseen obstacles which had suddenly started into existence. On the contrary, she was resolved that he should conquer them all, and win,—win in spite of the odds against him; in spite of the plots and counterplots of her detested relations.

It was the first time in all these long, weary, waiting years, that she had ever come into active, close collision with the family to which she belonged, but which had so contemptuously rejected her. It was the first actual tug of war: instinctively she felt that it was the first preliminary skirmish in the great battle which had yet to be fought out between them.

Poor Ethel! it was a strange freak of fortune which had ordained that she was to be the signal for the commencement of hostilities. For the girl herself, Madame O'Neil would, perhaps, have been but little inclined to seek a quarrel; certainly she would not have considered it worth while to wrench a bride for her son from an unwilling and dying father.

But for the victory over her relations she did care,—care with all her heart: it was but the beginning of the end; and, as she was resolved to win in the end, so also in the beginning was she quite determined not to be defeated.



CHAPTER XVII.

MEANWHILE Ethel was hastening home,—running almost. Very soon she was out of reach of Madame O'Neil's far-seeing, thoughtful eyes, pale and breathless, toiling up the steep, homeward road. She was longing to be at home again. The girl felt as though she were dreaming,—a bad, dreadful dream. Madame O'Neil's words were ringing in her ears, her suggestions were repeating themselves over and over again to her senses, and their meaning forcing itself upon her. Had it, then, really come to this, that she must actually contemplate and nerve herself for open revolt? Had it come to this,

that what had been play so long was now real earnest, and, having up to this allowed herself to glide down the stream of circumstance, she must now take the rudder, and direct her course herself?

But she would not believe it; any thing *might* happen, something must: she was young and sanguine, and could believe any thing rather than face the impossible possibility of open rebellion and war.

This morning, — how long ago it seemed now! Even when she had actually met Count O'Neil at Ste. Barbe's chapel, she had not been in earnest, or had not seriously faced the position. She had been merely playing with edged tools, and tasting the excitement of a forbidden pleasure. So long as it was with her lover only that she had to do, she somehow felt herself to be mistress of the situation, competent to go as far as she found it agreeable to go, and yet to draw back in time; in short, to flirt to the very extremities of flirting, and yet to keep her head sufficiently cool not to do any thing downright wrong or silly. But now she became all at once aware that she had blindly put herself in the lion's jaws, and that she was caught, hopelessly caught, in the meshes of her own folly and wilfulness. The fact was, that at last Miss Mildmay had come in direct contact with a more powerful will and nature than her own, and that, in Madame O'Neil's hands, she felt herself to be weak as a child.

And so Ethel was miserable and wretched enough, as, indeed, everybody will acknowledge she well deserved to be. And she made other people miserable too, as old Mrs. O'Neil informed her when she reached home. "Your papa was inquiring for you, and anxious about you," she told her reproachfully. "And Arthur has been here too, as cross as two sticks that he did not go away as he had intended to do to-day. I don't know what has come over him," she observed in a tone of irritation, "and over everybody; and it is all your fault, child,—all your fault. The fact is, that neither Arthur nor I can bear to see you making such a fool of yourself, behaving so badly," she concluded with a severe nod.

"What does Mr. O'Neil know about it?" Ethel inquired, flaming up.

"He knows that you met that impostor this morning; for I told him so," said the old lady dolefully.

"Did you, indeed? Well, and what does he think about it?" Miss Mildmay inquired coolly, though it was not difficult to detect some anxiety in her voice.

"He thinks that you are a headstrong,

silly girl, and that you ought to be locked up, and put on bread and water, till you come to your senses," Mrs. O'Neil replied tartly.

"What?" Ethel was pale, speechless, with indignation.

"He does, indeed! He said so an hour ago."

"I consider Mr. O'Neil excessively impertinent, and I should like to tell him so," Miss Mildmay said in her clearest tones.

But for all that she did not tell him so: perhaps she thought better of it; or perhaps her courage, great as it was, failed her; perhaps both found it easier to express their indignant sentiments to a third party than face to face to give one another their mutual uncomplimentary opinions. At all events, when they met, they met coolly but civilly, and without any open explosion of displeasure.

It was a wretched time,—wretched, uncomfortable, constrained, peaceless. Peace, indeed, seemed to have taken wings and fled from the villa, not the less really because its outward semblance was still preserved.

It was on the evening of the next day that the Delneuves, mother and daughter, came to pay their promised visit to Ethel. Everybody knows what state a household is in when any little commonplace event is hailed with joyful eagerness, provided only that it breaks in upon the dreary *gêne* and constraint with which its members regard one another.

The dinner had been solemn and stiff: Col. Mildmay had not, without some trouble, forced Arthur O'Neil to join it; but he had been silent and abstracted, and had not fulfilled his accustomed rôle of enlivening it.

Ethel had been saucy and talkative, doubtless for contradiction's sake, but her efforts had been a flat failure; and it was with a petulant sigh of relief that she rose from the dinner-table. "How dull we all are!" she remarked with an innocent laugh. "One would suppose that one of us had been misbehaving himself, and that all the others were thinking of the lectures they were going to give him." And the young lady marched out of the room with a pair of flushed cheeks and a lofty head.

Out of the room on to the cool, pleasant terrace, where the sun was saying a loving good-night to the serene, quiet valley.

Madame Delneuve and Christine were coming up the avenue. Ethel ran to meet them joyously. "At last!" she said, "at last! I thought you never meant to come."

"You are alone, mademoiselle, are you not?" Madame inquired anxiously. "Our

toilets are, as you see, not suited to company."

"You are charming, madame, and so is Christine. But we are alone, quite; that is to say, only Mr. O'Neil and his mother." And she pronounced the names with ill-concealed impatience.

Christine started. "Mr. O'Neil? but he said adieu to us two days ago." And Ethel fancied that she spoke nervously and a little excitedly.

Miss Mildmay laughed. "Oh, but that means nothing!" she said. "Mr. O'Neil's farewells are like those of great actors to the stage: there are always seven or eight before the really *last* one takes place."

At the villa foreign customs were observed: the gentlemen did not sit after dinner, but rose with the ladies. At that very moment Mr. O'Neil stepped out upon the terrace. Had he heard her giddy, saucy words? Miss Mildmay wondered, feeling, for once in her life, thoroughly disconcerted and a little frightened. She had been speaking loudly; and the breadth of the terrace, from the windows to the steps on which she was standing, was not great. It was awkward, to say the least of it; and Christine did not mend matters by beginning to scold her. "You naughty, amusing child!" she said. "But it is true. We have a right to *taguiner* him a little. Come, monsieur, make your confession. Once upon a time you were a man of stern purpose and resolve. What has changed you so? In the old days I remember at —, once you had said that you would do a thing, you did do it, all that one could say against it."

"For example?" Mr. O'Neil inquired calmly.

"For example, there was no keeping you there a day longer than you chose to remain, even though, when you left us, you were not fit to travel."

"I had taxed your mother's and your kindness long enough, mademoiselle; but à propos of what is all this?"

"Simply this: three days ago you said good-by to us, and said you were going immediately; yet here you are still."

"I plead guilty, mademoiselle, to the charge,—let me see how it happened,—ah, yes! I have been delayed."

"A lucid explanation! Delayed by what, pray? But forgive me: I am indiscreet perhaps."

"By no means: I have been delayed by — there was the faintest possible hesitation,—“by circumstances. I believe that I really do mean to go to-morrow, though,” he added coolly.

" You believe that you really do mean to go to-morrow ? Ah, monsieur ! the demon of indecision has then really got possession of you."

" We are very satirical to-night," said Mr. O'Neil, laughing. " But you remember my mother of old, mademoiselle ; do you not ? Doubtless she and Madame Delneuve are at this very moment comparing notes about that famous illness of mine. You know that my mother hampers my movements now and then, just a little, and that I am not always quite a free agent," he explained.

" Ah ! it is all your mother's fault, then ? " and Christine laughed lightly.

" Not altogether : it has been a little my own fault too. How very curious you are, mademoiselle ! "

Christine laughed. " I deserve that," she acknowledged. " I believe that I *am* curious, — are you ? " she inquired suddenly of Ethel.

" About people and things which interest me, I believe I am curious."

Miss Mildmay replied coldly, and speaking for the first time.

" An oracular reply : what does it signify ? " asked Christine gayly.

" It means that Miss Mildmay is anxious to make me understand that *my* movements do not interest her," Mr. O'Neil observed quietly. " But I understood that quite well already."

There was an awkward little pause : Mr. O'Neil's candid explanation took both girls aback.

" *Bêtise* ! it does not mean any thing of the sort," Christine said, recovering herself the first. And then she added coaxingly, and pressing Ethel's arm, which was within her own, " Now, does it mean that, *chère* ? Come, be good, and say that it does not."

" I never contradict people," Miss Mildmay replied : " when I was a little girl, they used to tell me that it was a rude thing to do."

Perhaps after this it was a happy diversion that the servant should make his appearance to announce that tea was ready.

Within doors it seemed as though things were going on more comfortably. The tea-table looked bright and inviting. The colonel was pretty well and in good spirits, and Mr. O'Neil had made a good guess on the subject of his mother's and Mrs. Delneuve's conversation.

" The boy is always catching fevers : Dr. O'Toole says that he is certain to die of one sooner or later," the old lady was observing in her funny, old-fashioned

French, to which the polite Frenchwoman listened without a symptom of a betraying smile.

" Truly, he was seriously ill then : the doctors almost despaired of him," she replied.

" But M. your son looks strong and robust now."

" Oh, yes, thank God ! it is only fever I am afraid of for him ; for Dr. O'Toole, who never says a word that is not true, says, that, if there were a fever within ten miles, Arthur would be sure to catch it. And so your daughter is going to be married, madame ? " she went on, perceiving Christine. " I am delighted to hear it, — very glad indeed. I always like to hear of these things. Come over here, my dear, and tell me all about it."

It was quite true that Mrs. O'Neil had been pleased to hear of Mademoiselle Delneuve's engagement ; a lurking jealousy and distrust of her son's grateful attachment to the French ladies being one of the troublesome thorns of her life. It was a constant bugbear to her, that Mr. O'Neil's deep gratitude might possibly mean something more ; and, ever since she had been at Nice, she had fancied it necessary to keep Madame Delneuve at a safe and civil distance, and to discourage undue intimacy. It had been a difficult card to play ; for poor Mrs. O'Neil was torn between the gratitude she owed them for the services they had rendered her son, and terror that he might be entrapped into a marriage with Christine.

After all, she was a young woman. Moreover, she was a French young woman ; and Mrs. O'Neil looked upon the French female sex with a mortal hatred and distrust. She might have forgiven Christine every thing, — her want of money, of family, of every thing which would in her eyes have made her a suitable match for her son ; she might possibly even have forgiven the French girl the obligation which Mr. O'Neil always so loudly proclaimed that he owed her, and which her warm, jealous heart found it a little difficult not to resent : but she could not forgive Christine the fact of being a Frenchwoman, and in consequence of that fact she detested her.

Now, however, she did not detest her any more. Once that she had been assured that she was safely engaged to M. Barbier, and innocent of matrimonial designs upon her son, she was ready enough to discover that she was charming, and to feel most charitably and benevolently disposed to her.

" Tell me all about it, my dear," she said

with her most winning smiles. And she drew the French girl to her, and made her sit down by her side. Christine, however, did not seem to have very much to tell. It was her mother who complied with Mrs. O'Neil's request, and with gentle triumph dilated upon the subject of the approaching nuptials.

M. Barbier was an excellent *parti*, and in every way worthy of her daughter's esteem and affection. She was thoroughly satisfied and content. The marriage would take place immediately after Easter. The *futur* had already provided an extremely handsome *corbeille*. In short, every thing was as it should be.

"M. Barbier said that he would probably call to fetch us home this evening," Madame Delneuve concluded: "so if you will permit me, madame, I shall have the honor of presenting him to you."

Mrs. O'Neil professed herself delighted at the prospect, and gave Christine a playful little push.

"A devoted lover my dear, I see," she said gayly: "he is afraid that somebody will run away with you, I suppose. Quite right, quite right. I like to see the young men kept up to the mark, and made to do their duty properly."

"M. Barbier is not young," Christine said a little shortly: "he is nearly fifty, I believe."

"Ah!" and Mrs. O'Neil looked rather disconcerted; "but that is young, — quite young enough," she went on cheerfully. "I always tell Arthur that a man of forty is a boy, — a mere boy. Why, men of forty marry girls of eighteen every day," she asserted in a somewhat defiant tone.

"Do they?" and Christine looked at Mr. O'Neil with a half-smile.

He colored and laughed.

"They sometimes do, I believe, perpetrate that folly, when they can get the girls of eighteen to marry them. You forgot that last clause, mother."

"Nonsense! of course they can. Arthur, as I am always telling you, if you would only take care of your hair" —

"Mother, it is hopeless. I discovered a new crop of gray ones this morning."

"Of course you did, because you will never use the simplest remedies I ask you to use. But it don't signify. The youngest men get gray and bald now-a-days; and Heaven knows that it is better to have some hair, though it be gray, than none at all. To my mind a bald head is the ugliest thing in creation, or rather not in creation, for it never was created. Even newborn infants have some hair upon their heads," said Mrs. O'Neil vehemently.

There was a general laugh at this, in the midst of which Christine remarked quietly, "M. Barbier is bald, madame, as you will see presently."

"Bless me! Why did you not tell me so before, child?" the old lady inquired testily.

Evidently bald heads, gray hairs, and marriages were delicate subjects, which it was as well to eschew. Christine turned off the little awkwardness with a laugh, and a declaration that she did not object to baldness in the least.

"It looks venerable," she said; and then she rose from her seat by Mrs. O'Neil, and walked over to the piano.

"You play, don't you?" she said to Ethel. "Come and play us something."

Ethel did play a little, and Christine sang a little. The two girls made music together, while Mrs. O'Neil and the colonel played their game of draughts, and Madame Delneuve and Mr. O'Neil chatted perhaps over the old — days, or, more likely, over the new, pleasant days that were to come when Christine would be established in her own home, and her mother with her. Christine had not much voice, — hardly any indeed; yet she sang a few little French "Romances," cleverly and touchingly, as clever people know how to do these things, even when their voices are the merest pretences of voices. Presently Mr. O'Neil and her mother paused in their conversation and listened to her.

"*Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment,*
Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie,"

the girl was singing; and, when she had finished the song, Mr. O'Neil rose at once, and walked straight over to the piano.

"I remember that song of old," he said, looking at her with a smile: "are you as fond of it as ever?"

"It is pretty, I think," she answered carelessly. "I always sing the same songs, I know so few."

It would be hard to say what at that especial moment sent a sudden flash of suspicion through Ethel's mind; but then and there she did for the first time suspect that Christine liked Mr. O'Neil.

"And that is her romance," she thought. "Can it really be?"

She was standing in the recess of the window looking at the pair, and feeling as if she were in a dream. They were perfectly calm and composed, and they were discussing some song which lay open on the piano. But there was something in Christine's face, a compression of her lips, or a dimness in her eyes, which caused a

lump to come into Ethel's throat, and made her heart beat.

"She does like him," she said to herself. "I could swear that she does. What a blind idiot I have been!"

Christine had already risen from the piano and was close to her.

"Monsieur O'Neil says that it is a pity to be within doors this lovely night," she said. "Shall we take a turn in the garden? What ails you?" she inquired suddenly: "you look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Perhaps I have," and Ethel laughed a little nervously; and indeed in her heart she was thinking that she had seen the ghost of poor Christine's secret and silent love.

Christine looked at her.

"Well, will you come out?" she inquired.

"Presently: do you two go, and I will follow."

"But"—and the French girl hesitated.

But Mr. O'Neil overruled her hesitations.

"We will wait for Miss Mildmay out on the terrace," he said, speaking a little impatiently, as he was apt to do when his wishes were not at once complied with. "Come, mademoiselle."

"Go and fetch a shawl and follow us," Christine said; and then Mr. O'Neil opened the window for her, and they both went out.

But Ethel did not fetch a shawl, nor, indeed, show the slightest intention of following them. On the contrary, she stood quite still, half hidden by the folds of the curtain, looking after them, — not for very long, however, only for a few minutes, till, probably tired of waiting for her, they went down the terrace-steps, and disappeared out of her sight. As Ethel knew very well, the villa garden was a pleasant place to walk in by night, — by moonlight particularly; for the moonlight made of it a magical sort of garden, and its stealthy, slender fingers stole through the dark, shadowy alleys, and made all sorts of fanciful patterns upon the earth, such as mortal fingers could never have devised. It was not a trim, well-kept garden by any means, but wild, neglected, overgrown, revelling in careless southern luxuriance, with winding paths choked with trailing boughs and branches, and with sudden glimpses of the valley beneath, and the mountains and the sea, — a romantic, beautiful garden, with leafy nooks, and broken nymphs, and dried-up fountains, and mouldy summer-houses, — sad relics of departed and better times, when the villa had

been a happy, beloved home, instead of a lodging-house let year after year to careless, unloving strangers, who came and went, and were seen in it no more.

Mr. O'Neil and Christine apparently knew how to appreciate its beauties at all events. Ethel came and talked to Madame Delneuve, and the colonel and Mrs. O'Neil squabbled over many games; and still they did not return. Madame Delneuve got a little anxious at last.

"Christine will catch cold," she said; "and besides, — besides, M. Barbier will be here presently, and" — She left the consequence to be inferred.

Ethel laughed.

"Is M. Barbier of a jealous disposition?" she inquired rather dryly.

"No. He has a most excellent disposition, — thoroughly good and generous; but the *convenances* you know, mademoiselle. He might perhaps think it a little strange to find" —

"To find the young lady he is engaged to taking a moonlight walk with another gentleman. Is that it, madame?"

"M. O'Neil is such an old friend, that I would trust Christine with him anywhere," Madame Delneuve replied nervously. "I am only thinking of the appearances."

"Are old friends never dangerous ones?" Ethel inquired abruptly.

Madame Delneuve gave her a half-anxious, half-perplexed look.

"I trust M. O'Neil thoroughly," she said with the faintest possible tinge of coldness in her voice: "he has been always so very kind and good to us. Christine and I have both reason to look upon him as our best friend."

They were actually entering the room as she finished the words. The crisp night-air had given Christine a bright color, and her eyes were sparkling. Ethel, for the first time, thought her actually pretty.

"You lazy child," the French girl said, coming up to her: "why did you not come out as you promised? It is such a lovely night!"

"You did not want me, did you? Two is often better company than three;" and Ethel looked at her with a half-smile.

Christine returned the look. Then suddenly she bent down and whispered in her ear, "What a little goose you are! We talked of you, and of you only, the whole time. He says you have no heart; and I agreed with him."

"Did you? You are probably both quite right."

But Christine had already turned away from her. "Look here, *ma mère*," she was

saying : " see the pretty *cadeau de noces* which M. O'Neil has given me. Is it not charming ? He was going to send it to me ; but, as he found me here to-night, he has given it to me instead."

It was a handsome gold locket set with precious stones. Madame Delneuve's eyes filled with tears. " Such a beautiful present ! —you are too kind and good ; " and she pressed his hand gratefully.

" Nonsense ! It is a mere trifle, — not half nice enough."

While they were all still admiring the gift, the servant announced that a gentleman had called for the ladies. Of course, M. Barbier was requested to enter, and the colonel himself went out to fetch him. In came the fat little Frenchman, hat in hand, and making his bow, — a universal bow meant for everybody ; but his eyes, as was natural, only sought Christine. She was already putting on her hat, and seemed in a hurry to be gone. " You are a little late, Jules ; are you not ? " she said.

Jules' good-natured eyes sparkled. Perhaps it is only rarely that he had the pleasure of hearing his *future* address him by his Christian name, and perhaps more rarely still did she evince any impatience for his coming. " I was afraid to disturb you by coming too early," he replied meekly ; but he reddened with pleasure.

In five minutes more, good-nights had been exchanged, and the French people had all departed.

" An excellent man, I am sure," Mrs. O'Neil remarked in a patronizing yet doubtful tone of voice, commenting upon M. Barbier ; and she looked slyly and furtively at her companions. " No doubt that it is a very suitable match."

She evidently expected contradiction ; yet nobody did contradict her. " He is not handsome ; but young ladies are too strong-minded and sensible to care much about such trifles now-a-days, I suppose," was the only reply her remark provoked, and that came from the colonel in the careless tone of a man who is speaking of a totally indifferent matter.

As to Ethel, she was yawning, and declaring herself to be half dead with sleep. When her father retired, as with his early invalid habits he did at once, she became fidgety, and begged of Mrs. O'Neil to excuse her.

" Probably, though, you are very glad to be rid of me," she said with one of her deprecating, charming smiles, as she kissed her. And then, holding her candle before her face, she held out her hand to Mr. O'Neil. " I am stupid. Is it good-by, or

only good-night ? I quite forget," she inquired with a meek sauciness which was nothing less than audacious.

But he was her match. " I don't know," he said carelessly. " Pray don't trouble yourself on the subject." And he just touched the little white hand which she had offered him.

Mrs. O'Neil groaned and puckered her forehead. Matters were, no doubt about it, getting altogether too complicated for her. And Ethel marched out of the room with a warlike tramp, brandishing her candle defiantly, and sowing grease broadcast upon her dress.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEXT morning Miss Mildmay awoke with a pain at her heart, — with a horrible, distinct presentiment that some great crisis was approaching. Indeed, a sense of depression and gloom seemed to hang over the villa ; and everybody in it seemed more or less out of tune. Mrs. O'Neil was cross and irritable ; the colonel had had a wretched night, and was restless and complaining.

" I wish we were at home again, love," he said wearily to Ethel. " I am sick of the eternal glare of this place ; and I am longing for the green fields and green trees of old England again."

His daughter tried to soothe him. " We must have patience," she said : " it is winter still in England."

The colonel sighed. With the caprice of an invalid, Nice had suddenly become distasteful to him, and he was longing for change.

" We might move slowly," he suggested, " delaying on the road. I am tired of Nice. Besides, darling"—

But then, alas ! he paused, looking at her hesitatingly. He could not bring himself to approach the, dreaded subject. The poor man shrank with a morbid terror from the thought of paining his darling. Ethel's heart tightened, — she, too, wanted to speak ; she, too, longed for, yet feared, an explanation. But then an interruption came, and the opportunity was lost ; the fact being, that both lacked the moral courage to make the discovery that both their wills were strong, and that neither would yield to the other.

It was a wretched morning. Ethel's heart jumped into her mouth at every sound. She felt sick and miserable. The

suspense she was enduring was intolerable, for every minute she expected the arrival of Count O'Neil's letter; and she trembled in anticipation over the decisive turn it must give to the situation. It had not come yesterday. Madame O'Neil had been so far merciful as to give her a little breathing-time, a short respite. But Ethel's instinct told her that Madame O'Neil was not the woman to put her hand to the plough, and then to turn back. Once that her interference and assistance had been solicited and promised, it was not likely they would be promised in vain.

Yet the morning dragged slowly and wearily by, and no sign was made. With nervous tenderness and solicitude, Ethel hovered around her father, one moment dreading, the next almost longing for, something to happen which would put an end to the uncomfortable, false position of affairs. There seemed to be a tacit but insecure sort of truce established between her father and herself,—a miserable, hollow truce, which the veriest trifles must destroy. It was like the calm before the storm. The dark, brooding clouds had gathered together; but they had not yet burst. And to Ethel's impatient, impetuous disposition, no storm could be worse than this sickening, ominous calm.

Mrs. O'Neil, contrary to her usual custom, passed the morning shut up in her room, *tête-à-tête* with her maid Flaherty. Flaherty was a character, and an old crony of her mistress's, in whose service she had passed the best part of her life. She was Mrs. O'Neil's confidante, aide-de-camp, every thing, in short, as well as her maid. Since they had come to the villa, however, her star had somewhat waned; that is to say, that the attractions of her society had been rather thrown into the shade by those of Miss Mildmay's, and her mistress's fidelity had wavered a little in favor of the companionship of the gay young girl.

But somehow now, Mrs. O'Neil seemed to have taken a sudden turn against youth's giddiness and wilfulness and saucy caprice, and, for this morning at all events, was glad to fall back upon the safe, steady Flaherty again. When she did at last emerge from her room, she made no secret of the cause of her grievances.

"I can't believe that Arthur has actually gone without bidding me good-by," she lamented. "I was sure that he would come this morning."

"Did you not bid him good-by last night, then?" Ethel inquired.

"Perhaps I did, child,—perhaps I did. But I had twenty things to say to him still,

Besides, I did not think that he really meant to go. If I had thought it, I would have gone with him myself. At least, I think I would. What good am I doing here?" she concluded with melancholy irritation. "As Arthur has told me twenty times, I am an old fool to meddle in other people's affairs."

Ethel agreed too fully with her to contradict her, and was silent.

"Perhaps he has not gone, after all," she said thoughtfully after a little pause.

"Do you think so? Perhaps he has not. I will send to the hotel to inquire," Mrs. O'Neil said with eager hopefulness.

The messenger returned in due time. He had reached the hotel just as Mr. O'Neil had been starting for the train; and he brought a little scribbled note, in which her son bade her farewell. He was not going very far, however, he said,—only to Mentone; and he would probably return in a few days, when he hoped to find his mother ready to accompany him home.

"I thought that he had business in London," Ethel remarked rather dryly, upon hearing this.

"So did I, child. Certainly he pretended that he had. The fact of the matter is, that there is no comprehending him nor anybody else; but I think," and she gave the girl a severe look,—"I think that he is disgusted with you," she declared candidly.

"Do you? Well, I wish that he would save himself the trouble," replied Miss Mildmay impetuously.

Mrs. O'Neil drew herself up in a flutter. "I will go and see about packing up my things," she announced with dignity. "I certainly must not delay Arthur any longer."

Ethel went to her room, and did not see anybody for several hours. The first interruption that came was her maid, announcing that it was time to dress for dinner. Another and a more startling announcement came too, before long. "And so, miss, we are to pack up and be off out of this in three days, I hear," Hannah observed cheerfully, as she was smoothing the fair crumpled hair.

"What?" and Ethel started as though she had been shot.

"Oh! Mr. Evans (the colonel's valet) told us all in the servant's hall ten minutes ago," Hannah went on; and then observing her mistress's agitation, "perhaps he only wanted to take a rise out of us. However, he said that the colonel had given orders that every thing should be got ready."

Ethel's toilet did not, we may be sure, last long after this. She hastened to the drawing-room. Her father and Mrs. O'Neil were there before her. She heard their voices through the closed door; but they paused abruptly as she opened it. She looked from one to the other, and something conscious and anxious in their faces told her that the letter had come; that it had come, and had been discussed, and perhaps answered; that they had taken her fate in their hands, and had decided upon it. The girl felt herself grow pale with indignation; but outwardly she was calm enough. "Is it true that we are to leave on Thursday, papa?" she inquired as quietly as she could. "Hannah says that Evans told her so."

The colonel looked discomfited. "What gossips those servants are, to be sure!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I mentioned to him that we might leave, only half an hour ago. I am thinking of it, love,—if you have no objection, that is," he added, looking at her doubtfully.

"It is a sudden idea," Ethel observed shortly, turning away from him. She was choking. Her eyes filled with tears. Her father had, then, lost all trust in her. The very servants knew more of his plans and projects than she did. Now she fancied that she had detected a significant, compassionate glance in Hannah's eyes, as though even the maid guessed at and sympathized with her young lady's troubles. And as to Mrs. O'Neil, the girl almost hated the old lady just then; for had not Mrs. O'Neil supplanted her in her father's confidence? had she not stolen in between them, making them strangers almost to one another?

And so things had reached a climax now, and what was to be done? She was out in the garden that evening, passionately making herself the question. Ethel's temper was roused. She was indignant and angry. Never had a girl, she told herself, been treated as she was treated; and now, more than ever, was she resolved not to submit. A persuasive, kind word might perhaps have worked wonders, she thought. If they had but taken the trouble to reason with her, to beg of her to pause, to grant even delay, what might she not have done? But this tyrannical mode of proceeding revolted her. Yes: it was tyrannical,—nothing more nor less. She remembered Madame O'Neil's words, and her heart began to beat. What if her father were a real tyrant, and that the moment had actually come to resist him? She stopped suddenly in her hasty walk, and stood still

to think about it. The idea had been lying dormant in her brain, and now it suddenly started into vigorous life.

What if he were unjust and harsh and cruel? Some fathers were all these dreadful things, she believed; though, till now, she had certainly had no personal experience on the subject. What if—and just then Ethel heard a voice calling her name, and a quick step behind her; and, turning round, she saw Count O'Neil coming towards her.

The most perplexed questions often are given the suddenest answers. Quick rays of light occasionally reveal the secret of the puzzle which has distracted our brain for long. All Ethel's stormy questions seemed answered then. Her perplexity seemed set at rest. The young man's excitement all at once calmed hers. He caught her hand, and pressed it to his lips. He told her the old story over again,—how well he loved her. He made her a passionate declaration. This time there was no playing at love, no little artifices nor coynesses, nor hesitations, nor obtrusive recollection of the famous *convenances*. It was much too serious and solemn a moment for that. Indeed, the exigencies of the position seemed to have recklessly scattered all such petty considerations to the wind. It is wonderful how quickly trifles dwindle away and disappear before an emergency.

"I was going up to the house to insist upon seeing you when I caught sight of your dress through the trees," the count told her. "You would have come to me, would you not?" he inquired anxiously.

"I don't know. They would not have let me, perhaps."

"Not have let you? Surely they would not employ force"—

"Oh, no!" and Ethel could not help laughing a nervous, tearful, hysterical little laugh. Heaven knew that things looked black and grave enough; but the word "force" in connection with her loving, invalid father, and gentle little Mrs. O'Neil, had a sound about it which was almost ludicrous.

Count O'Neil would have been angry with her for laughing, if she had not sighed immediately afterwards.

"How do I know," he went on, "what they might not do to you? After the insulting answer which your father saw fit to send to my"—

"Then you did write? He answered you?" Ethel interrupted breathlessly.

"Did you not know? Did he tell you nothing?"

"No, nothing," she replied with sad indignation.

"Ah, I knew it! I guessed it! I told my mother so!" the young man exclaimed. "I well knew that you would never have permitted such a letter to be sent to me. Here it is, mademoiselle. I received it within an hour from the time I sent mine. He did not take long to reflect upon his answer," he added bitterly.

Ethel took the letter, and read it by the light of the moon, while O'Neil stood by devouring her with his eyes. No wonder the young man was incensed. It was a cold, short, decided refusal to give him his daughter's hand. No explanation or apology was vouchsafed. Presently Ethel raised her eyes, and, slowly and deliberately folding the paper, returned it to him.

"Well," he inquired breathlessly.

She half smiled. "We are to leave Nice in three days, Count O'Neil," she said quietly.

"In three days, mademoiselle! Ah, Ethel—dearest Ethel—it cannot be! You are not serious!"

She was indeed serious; but so was the young man. He loved her. Again and again he told her so. And she loved him. This also he told her. It was a torrent of words, an avalanche of protestations, of eager, irresistible entreaties. It was a desperate assault, a fiery bombardment. How could the poor little, but weakly-defended fortress hold out against such an attack? What was left to it but to capitulate at discretion, to lay down its arms, to surrender?

"But what is to be done?" Ethel said desperately, when at last her voluble lover paused to take breath, and it had come to her turn to say something.

What was to be done? Count O'Neil was at no loss for an answer now. He had come to the villa armed with an answer for the inevitable question, strengthened by his mother's counsels, ready with her suggestions. After all, following immediately upon his passionate adjurations and fiery declarations, the active measures which he was ready to propose seemed to be mild and meek enough. Perhaps Ethel had been prepared to hear of an elopement, of escapes from windows, of scaling walls, of special licenses, of desperate adventures. But no, the young man had no such propositions to make. All he urged was, that she should come to spend the next day with his mother; that she should put herself under her protection.

"There is no time to be lost," he reminded her. "In three days your father threatens to take you away. Whatever is

to be done must be done at once. He will yield so soon as he sees that he must yield; that you are not a child to be guided by leading-strings; that you are capable of a decided step. From my mother's house we will both write to him to beg for his consent, and to tell him that if he refuses it— But he will not refuse," he said, hastily checking himself. "Ethel, if he sees that you are really determined, he will do as you wish. Everything depends on yourself."

Ethel was silent. She was watching a tiny cloud which was slowly sailing across the deep-blue, starlit sky; and a whimsical idea played through her silly brain that she would wait till it had reached the moon to give him her answer. She knew very well what it all meant. She knew very well that Madame O'Neil and her son had resolved in their hearts that once she had been induced to leave her home, she should not be allowed to return to it until her father's consent had been wrung from him. She knew— Suddenly she started violently. A tall figure was approaching, and the next minute had passed.

Miss Mildmay bit her lips. An irresistible impulse had made her draw back into the deep shadow of some trees close at hand. If she had had an instant for reflection, she would probably have disdained to move an inch; but, undoubtedly, both her own and her companion's first instinct had been concealment.

"It is Mr. O'Neil!" she exclaimed after a moment's pause. "But how can it be? He went away to-day."

"Went away! I saw him at six o'clock this evening. Ah, he, at least, may come and go as he chooses!" he said bitterly.

"How can it be?" Ethel repeated thoughtfully. And then she added quietly, "He saw us, I suppose." And she looked up to find her little cloud again. But a wind had wafted it away. It was lost somewhere in the deep-blue, starry depths; and the girl felt lonely as though she had lost a friend.

"Do you think he did? I hope not," said O'Neil anxiously. "He will perhaps tell, and there will be a commotion, and you may be exposed to— I will follow him, and challenge him to do more mischief than he has already done," exclaimed the young man in fiery tones. And he did actually move away.

But Ethel caught his arm, and detained him. She laughed, and yet she was pleased and touched. It pleased her that her knight should be ready to rush into the lists, and fight her battles; but common sense told her that it was unnecessary to prove his

prowess now. And so she laughed, and left her hand almost caressingly upon his arm.

"What does it matter, whether he saw us or not?" she said with gay defiance. "He can't hurt us; can he? Let him tell if he chooses. So much the better if he does. There will be a fuss; but I am well able to bear it. They will hardly lock me up, I think;" and she laughed again.

"And you will come to us to-morrow,—to-morrow morning, will you not?" entreated the young man, forgetting his vengeance, his anger, every thing but his love, at the soft touch of her little hand and the sweet sound of her laugh. "Come to us to-morrow, and the future will take care of itself. Heaven favors the brave, you know; and you are brave and true and noble. Here is a little note which my mother has sent you. It explains all."

Ten minutes later, Count O'Neil was walking with an elated, triumphant step away gayly, and with his high tenor voice serenading the moon; and Ethel, with a curious pain at her heart, and a strange dizziness in her head, had slowly turned towards the house. On the terrace she paused. The *salon* was brightly lit. Mrs. O'Neil was seated near the great white stove, and her son was next her. Her face looked softly happy. The clouds of the day were dispelled. She was holding his hand, and looking up at him with a smile. But, though the old lady looked happy, she looked a little puzzled too. Ethel went in boldly.

"You see, he has not gone, after all, child!" Mrs. O'Neil exclaimed triumphantly as she entered. "There was a fate against it: I knew there was."

Mr. O'Neil stood up. "A commonplace sort of fate," he said with a little constrained laugh. "I was late for the train. Just half a minute late."

"How strange!" and Ethel looked incredulous.

"Yes; for such a thing to happen to me, who am generally punctual. The horse under my *fiacre* was lame, and I had calculated the time too closely."

"It is strange!" Ethel repeated. And she looked incredulous still.

Mr. O'Neil gave her a keen glance, and resumed his seat in silence.

"And now," pursued his mother gleefully, "we shall all start together on Monday. It will be such a comfort to have Arthur to take care of us and look after every thing! Dear me! You and I, child, and the poor colonel, would have made a

wretched business of the journey between us."

"We would have got on very well. Papa and I managed very well when we were coming here; and papa is stronger now than he was then. Besides," she went on, after a little thoughtful pause, "perhaps we shall not leave on Monday at all, Mrs. O'Neil. It is too soon."

Mrs. O'Neil nodded her head significantly. "Oh, yes, we shall! Your papa has made up his mind, my dear," she said.

"Has he? But he may change it again. Somehow, I fancy that he will. By the way, where is papa?"

"Gone to bed. He was tired."

"And so am I." And she looked at her watch. "Ten o'clock! dear me! How quickly the evening went by!"

"I don't think so at all. I found it very long till Arthur came. Your papa was not well, and I was dull, and we made poor company for one another. You were out in the garden all the evening, you know, child. Upon my word, I hate that garden," she added testily.

"Oh, no! it is delightful; and such a lovely night as it is too! Is it not, Mr. O'Neil? By the way, what made you run away from me just now upon the avenue, as if you thought me a ghost? Did you not see me?" she inquired coolly.

Mr. O'Neil smiled. This piece of audacity was irresistible.

"Yes, I did see you," he replied calmly.

"Ah! I thought so, and Count O'Neil too. We did not quite recognize you till you had passed. I fancied you had left, you know; but Count O'Neil assured me you had not."

Mrs. O'Neil bounded on her seat. She could not believe her ears.

"You don't mean to say that that impudent fellow presumed to,"—she began.

But Miss Mildmay was prudent as well as brave. She had gradually approached the door, and now she had opened it and closed it behind her.

Mrs. O'Neil drew a long breath. "My goodness!" she exclaimed.

It was all she could say. Her son laughed.

"Miss Mildmay is frank, at least," he observed: "it is easy to see that this hole-and-corner work is against her grain."

"Arthur, do you mean to say that you saw that young man with her, and that you did not knock him down or shoot him?" demanded his mother indignantly.

"I do indeed, mother. I would have liked to knock him down certainly. But

what affair is it of mine?" he asked with a short laugh, "if she is resolved to marry that"—

"To marry him! To marry Denis Irwin's son! Arthur, are you mad? It would break her father's heart. It would kill him at once."

"She means to do it," Mr. O'Neil said thoughtfully.

"Nonsense! She cannot. We are going away on Monday. Thank God! we are leaving this wicked place on Monday," Mrs. O'Neil said, growing excited. "Arthur, the girl is silly; but she is not quite so foolish as seriously to want to do such a mad thing as that."

"It may not be such a mad thing, after all," Mr. O'Neil said quietly. "That young fellow may get Castle Garvagh yet."

"Arthur, Arthur! Don't break my heart. I can't believe it. You know that I cannot. Nothing has happened. You have had no bad news?" she inquired breathlessly.

"Nothing particular. Only a letter this morning, saying that that woman is better again, and that she is delaying coming home, and that nothing is to be got out of her. It is weary, weary work," he said with a quick, impatient sigh.

"God knows that it is. God knows that it is a wonder my heart is not broken. It would have broken long ago but for the hope that keeps me alive,—the hope of seeing you master of your own before I die. But if once your courage fails, Arthur, I shall die; I know I shall," she said with a sob in her voice.

Mr. O'Neil kissed her. "But it is not failing, mother. So long as there is life there is hope. Never fear but that we shall make a good fight for the old place," he said with an assumed cheerfulness which deceived her. The elastic-spirited old lady cheered up at once.

"And we shall win, too, of course we shall. And then, Arthur, you will find a nice, pretty, sweet-tempered wife, and I shall be perfectly happy at last. That infatuated, saucy girl!" she broke out suddenly, and in a tone of profound disgust. "Certainly she is not the sort of wife for you, that is one thing; though, indeed, I believe that I was silly enough to fancy that"— And she broke off, giving her son a doubtful, furtive glance.

"Your fancies generally are silly, mother," he replied with a little laugh. And he stood up to leave. "Good-night: it is time for me to be off."

There was something sharp in the tone of his voice,—something sharp and painful,

which smote jarringly upon his mother's ears.

"She is a silly-pated, headstrong, impudent girl," went on the old lady, waxing warm, and holding her son's hand tight. "Thank God, Arthur, that you are a sensible man, and not one to be made a fool of by such a minx as that."

"It is very fortunate certainly. Good-night, mother!"

But she was not satisfied yet: far from it, indeed. "Arthur," she said suddenly and yearningly.

"Mother."

"I was miserable about that French girl; and now that is off my mind"—

He laughed. "Poor Christine! She is a dear, good girl, mother."

"But you don't want to marry her. You never wanted it."

"Of course not: I told you so a hundred times." And he spoke rather impatiently.

"Nor this one, either," persisted Mrs. O'Neil. "Worthless, wilful, undutiful, empty-brained chit of a pretty girl that she is."

"True enough, mother,—true enough, dear old mother." And he laughed.

"And yet," said Mr. O'Neil with a strange, slow, lingering tenderness.

"And yet," repeated Mrs. O'Neil sorrowfully and doubtfully.

There was a little silence. Mother and son looked into one another's eyes.

"And yet I believe that I love her, fool that I am. I *know* that I do!" he exclaimed with deep, sudden passion.

A dead, breathless pause followed this. Then Mrs. O'Neil drew him down to her, and put her arms round his neck with a groan.

"My goodness!—my goodness!" she sighed. "Oh that we had never put foot in this horrid place! God help us!"

And the poor old lady wrung her hands, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XIX.

ETHEL did not sleep that night; yet, when morning came, she felt no fatigue, and her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement. She had not spent the night idly. During it she had written to her father; and, though the letter was not a long one, it had cost her many hours, and had been written over and over again. Now at last she told him the

story of her grievances. How cruelly she believed herself to have been treated ; how she had suffered from his want of confidence ; how deeply she resented Mrs. O'Neil's interference between them, — a sad, somewhat incoherent little plaint, which it was a pity had not been put into words and got harmlessly rid of before this.

But, when she came to the real pith of the letter, Ethel hardly knew what to say, or how to say it, — how to tell him that she loved Count O'Neil, and was resolved to be his wife ; and that she was leaving her home with the intention of not returning to it till he had consented to the marriage. Many times she framed the words, and tried to write them ; but her tears fell upon them, and blotted them, making them almost illegible. "No matter," she thought, "he will understand my meaning clearly enough." And in a vague way she told him that she was going to spend the day with Madame O'Neil, and begged of him to write to her and tell her that he was not angry with her, and did not want to make her miserable for life by forcing her to disobey him. And then she threw down her pen and wrote no more, knowing well, as has been said, that her meaning, if not very lucidly expressed, would be more than intelligible to her father's heart.

The house was still hushed and quiet when Ethel had dressed herself, and was ready to leave her room. Madame O'Neil had begged of her to come to her early, — she had a particular reason, she said, — and the girl was not sorry to obey.

Delay was useless and painful. The sooner the brief little adventure — as she represented to her own mind that it was to be — was over, the better. Laden with such a resolution, she felt that she could not meet her father's eyes. If she was to go at all, she had better go at once, she thought, while her heart was sinking within her, and every moment what she had to do seemed more difficult and impossible. After all, what was it ? she asked herself, with a desperate resolution to be brave and light-hearted. Nothing so very dreadful surely. Was she not merely going to spend the day with a friend, and thus quietly to bring about the solution of a long-slumbering difficulty ? Was she not merely asserting the independence and loyalty of which she was so proud ? It would all be over in a few hours, and she would be home again, having adroitly and successfully carried her point, and won her victory. Ethel left her room, laughing at her own haunting fears, and valiantly sti-

fing the aching disgust which was torturing her.

When she reached her father's door, her light, swift steps paused. It was ajar, and very cautiously she looked in. The colonel had already risen. Probably he, too, had had a restless night ; for now he was in his dressing-gown, seated in his arm-chair, and asleep.

Like herself, he had been writing. On the table before him lay a half-finished letter ; and several papers were lying about.

Ethel went over and stood beside him, listening with suspended breath to his gentle breathing. The early morning sun was flooding the room ; happy birds were already singing merrily in the garden outside : but within all was quiet and hushed. No sound but that low, measured respiration, and the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece. Presently it struck an hour. Ethel watched expectantly ; but her father was not disturbed. Then she bent down and kissed him, — kissed his pallid, anxious forehead with her fresh, cool lips, reverently, yearningly, yet lightly. Still he never moved. Her heart was breaking. Great lumps were gathering in her throat. How pale and gentle he looked ! — the irritable expression, which illness had of late brought into his face, changed by repose into one of deep serenity and peace. And how well she loved him ! — how well, how well ! She had never known how well until now, when, for the first time in her life, she was about deliberately to inflict upon him a cruel pain, and that she found out how terribly difficult it was to do it.

Could she do it at all ? For a minute or two she thought that she could not. For a minute or two she would have given worlds that he would awake ; worlds that he would look at her with his loving eyes ; worlds that she might hear the tender sound of his voice. She could so easily have told him all then. Late as it was, it was yet not too late for an explanation. But Ethel had taken her fate in her own hands, and now Fate would not assist her.

The angel of sleep kept steady guard, and her father did not awake. Could she do it ? Yes, she could : she was doing it now. She had faltered ; but now she was firm again. Her word was given, and she was too proud to retract it, — too proud at the eleventh hour to draw back and prove herself a nervous, timid child ; too proud to submit tamely to what Madame O'Neil had told her was tyranny and injustice ; for, strange to say, Ethel thought more of Madame O'Neil just then than of Madame O'Neil's son.

Another look, another kiss, a brief sharp struggle, a pain going through her heart like a sharp knife, and then, with her hands tightly clasped together, the girl had stolen from the hushed room as noiselessly as she had entered it, out into the pleasant morning brightness where the purple mountains were melting in the azure skies, and the distant white villages were sparkling merrily in the sun.

It was not a long walk; and Ethel's hurried, nervous steps had soon accomplished it. But, early as it was, Madame O'Neil was waiting for her, and had all her arrangements ready. Foolish Ethel, but vaguely realizing what she was doing, and wilfully blinding herself to the possible consequences of the steps she was taking, had, we may be sure, thought of very little beyond the moment. If she had been asked what she expected would happen next, she would probably have replied that she supposed, that after a couple of quiet hours at Madame O'Neil's house, during which the villa would be in a state of wild commotion and uproar, her father, brought to see the urgency and seriousness of the case, would yield to necessity, and, like the pater-familias on the stage, forgive and bless his rebellious child. Silly Ethel! Nothing would get it out of her head that she was an aggrieved heroine of romance; and, as most of the romances with which she was acquainted had a triumphant ending, she never doubted but that her own must have the same. But, if she was a goose, Madame O'Neil was certainly not one. Less sanguine and more clear-sighted than Ethel, she by no means anticipated such an easy victory; nor was she, like her, oblivious of the fact that Col. Mildmay, having law and right to back him, could at any moment force his daughter to return. Delay and publicity were the two allies to which she trusted. The longer Ethel remained under her protection, so much more importance did her flight from home assume. The more widely was the young lady's escapade known, the more urgently would the dread of scandal and of the world's judgment force him to relent, and give his consent to her marriage. Madame O'Neil, in short, was, or considered herself to be, mistress of the position. Her tactics were simple in the extreme; but their very simplicity might, she hoped, prove the element of their success. If necessary, desperate measures could be resorted to. Once with her the young girl was more or less in her power. But, until mild means had been tried and

had failed, Madame O'Neil was in no wise anxious to adopt stronger ones, and to drive Col. Mildmay to extremities.

And so, when Ethel arrived, and had been warmly and affectionately welcomed, she found that an unexpected little arrangement had been made. There was to be a delightful expedition to Monaco for the day. A few friends were going. Ernest had already gone on to the station to take the tickets, and to engage a carriage. But the dear child looked pale and tired. She was hungry perhaps. Could it be that she had eaten nothing yet?

Ethel smiled. It was a fact. She had forgotten to take any thing before she left.

Madame O'Neil had to give food and drink to the poor little runaway. There was plenty of time, she said. They need not start for a quarter of an hour yet. The train did not leave till half-past nine o'clock.

"But," interrupted Ethel, looking dazed and perplexed, "would it not be better to wait till papa?" —

"That is true," said Madame O'Neil: "you would like to write to your father. Well, there is time for that too. A few lines is all that is necessary."

"But I have written to him," Ethel said.

Madame O'Neil looked at her in surprise: she could not make out this young girl, so weak and clinging one moment, so strong and independent the next.

"You have written to him; and what did you say, little one?"

Ethel reddened and laughed. "I told him that he must let me do as I liked, and that I had come to stop with you till he had promised to be good," she said.

"Brava! nothing could be better: eat, dear child; and here, take a glass of this Burgundy, you are weak and need it. Nonsense! it is worth half a dozen cups of your poisonous, nervous tea. And when will your father get this famous letter?" she asked, laughing.

"I don't know; I left it in my room: Hannah will perhaps find it. They will be surprised when I don't come to breakfast," she added with an uneasy smile.

Madame O'Neil looked thoughtful: the outraged parent might, perhaps, arrive at any moment, and then what a foolish little ending there would be to the foolish little adventure! She would have preferred that the letter should have been written from her house, and so more time gained: presently she discovered that there was not a moment to be lost. Count O'Neil, too, who either had not gone, or who had re-

turned from the station, and who appeared at the moment, adding to Ethel's sense of helplessness and confusion by the grateful ardor with which he welcomed her, hurried their movements. The girl did not know how to refuse to accompany them. Madame O'Neil, unaccustomed to resistance, feigned obliviousness to her hesitation and reluctance. "We are not running away with you," she said playfully: "the servants will know where we have gone. If your father wishes to come after you by the next train, there is nothing to prevent his doing so; but he will not, I am sure, be unkind enough to interrupt our little pleasure-party. More likely, that, when we return this evening we will find a letter or a"—

"What hour shall we return, madame?" Ethel asked.

"Whenever you please, dear child: there is a train at six or seven o'clock, for which, probably, we shall all be ready."

But, in the inner chambers of Madame O'Neil's councils, it had been decided that the day should be a really long one, and that they should not come back till the last train, which left Monaco about midnight.

"Come," she went on, as Ethel still looked unwilling: "what do a few hours here or there matter? You know that it is a long-standing promise of the colonel's to let you see Monaco. You cannot think of leaving Nice without doing so."

And so the girl's doubts were overruled, and they went. Madame O'Neil knew the human heart well, and knew that, under the circumstances, reflection and quiet were to be avoided, and distraction and excitement were to be sought. Afterwards, looking back upon that day, Ethel could never distinctly remember how it had been spent. It was like a dream to her, — a confused, disjointed dream, in which blue skies, and glittering seas, and glowing mountains, and orange and lemon trees, and perfume-laden air, were all mingled with music and laughter and gayety, and the subtle incense of pleasure and admiration. Ernest O'Neil's dark passionate eyes haunted her through it too, watching her with jealous affection, monopolizing her with the tender pride of possession. It went by quickly enough.

Madame O'Neil had acted kindly by the young girl, if it was a kind or a good thing to drive away a single sensible, serious thought, and to drown a better feeling in a whirl of excitement. Little chance, indeed, of thinking in the midst of a gay, light-brained party of young people, and in such a distracting, beautiful little place as Monaco, in which the flashy vices and fol-

lies, and unworthy attractions of Homburg and Baden, unite with the lavish generosity of nature and the tricks of art to make of it a hell with the externals of a paradise. Ethel looked on at it all bewildered, repelled, yet attracted: what a day it was!

They gambled and they laughed and they jested. She found herself in the midst of her little court of ball-room admirers again. She was queen once more: the retirement and quiet of the last few weeks had only increased her taste for amusement, and gave a new zest to her enjoyment.

She was young and giddy, and pretty and vain: moreover, she fancied herself engaged in a desperate adventure. Exciting visions of consequences were confusing her brain and heating her imagination: she almost supposed herself to be playing some grand and important rôle. No wonder that the girl's head was a little turned, and that as, by degrees, the influences by which she was surrounded grew stronger, and the morning's impressions faded away, she grew more and more reckless and determined. The hours were slipping by certainly; and as yet there had been no signs of pursuit from the enemy. Ethel half wondered; but even for wondering there was scarcely a moment. The railroad of time was rushing at full speed.

And so it was afternoon now. She had tired of the hot stifling rooms of the Casino, in which the rest of the party was amusing itself, and she had wandered out into the pretty gardens overhanging the sea. Count O'Neil was with her, of course; and presently they found a pleasant shady spot, where they could listen to the splendid stringed band for which Monaco is famed, and amuse themselves by watching the gay crowds passing to and fro. They were gay themselves. There are moments for every thing; and this was a moment for the recklessness and effervescence of youthful spirits, without care or thought for the future. Yet the young man was not losing the precious minutes. He was telling her now what she was to him, and how, from the first day he had seen her, he had loved her. "You were riding past, and the baron pointed you out to me," he told her: "I heard him without heeding; I did not even care to look. But, when you went by the second time, an impulse moved me: I did look, and"—

"And?" said Ethel with one of her arch, irresistible glances.

"And I was captivated: you smiled, and the whole earth seemed to have suddenly

brightened. I loved you then and there."

Perhaps the sceptical baron might have looked a little astonished at this statement. But even he would have been indulgent. It was exaggerated; but there was some truth in it, and Count O'Neil believed it to be entirely true just then.

"And you — when did you first care for me?" he asked presently, looking into her face with a confident smile.

It was a legitimate question. In all fairness it was her turn now; yet she looked startled and bewildered. When had she begun to care for him? When had it first come into her heart to do what she was doing for his sake? Madame O'Neil had put pretty much the same question to her a day or two ago, and she had not answered it. Could she answer it now?

Count O'Neil, at all events, never doubted but that she could. He was watching her, waiting with triumphant security her answer, when he suddenly felt her hand tremble, and saw her face change.

"Dearest, what is it?" he said anxiously.

A train had evidently arrived from Nice; for a fresh influx of visitors was filling the garden, and the *fiares* and omnibuses were depositing their loads in the little *place* in front of the hotel. Ethel stood up. "There is Mr. O'Neil," she said quietly, but with a subdued thrill in her voice.

Count O'Neil sprang to his feet too, with an oath. "Where?" he asked. He was coming toward them. In another minute he was close to them.

"I have come to fetch you home," he said, looking at Ethel, and ignoring her companion.

"Who sent you? Did papa send you?" she asked, flushing up.

"He has sent for you: come home. There is just time to catch the train, and the *fiacre* is waiting: you must come," he said sternly.

"There are two sides to that question, sir," broke in Count O'Neil impetuously. "Miss Mildmay is by her own will under my mother's protection: she shall not leave it for yours."

Mr. O'Neil did not seem even to have heard him. "Come," he said to Ethel, almost angrily.

The girl had sat down again: her presence of mind, which had for a moment deserted her, had returned, and she shook her head. "I have no wish to leave Madame O'Neil's protection for yours," she

said, instinctively repeating Count O'Neil's words.

"You hear that, sir," said the young man triumphantly; "and I give you fair notice, that if you presume to importune or annoy this young lady —"

"Ethel, come home!" repeated Mr. O'Neil. "For God's sake, come home! Your father is ill, very —"

"Ill!" she exclaimed. "Ill!"

But Count O'Neil took the word out of her mouth. "It is a lie, a pretence: you are imposing upon her," he exclaimed with rising temper.

"Hold your tongue, sir! Will you come, or not?" he added.

"Is it true? is papa really ill? You would not tell me a lie, would you?" she asked piteously.

"God knows I would not. He is ill, — dying!" said Mr. O'Neil.

"Dying!" Ethel said the word, and there was an awful pause. She was spell-bound, and never moved.

"We have not a moment: you must come," urged Mr. O'Neil in a gentle, broken voice.

Then she rose. The two men looked at her compassionately. It was impossible to be insensible to the horror and anguish which had all at once come into her face. In such moments as these, men are more overwhelmed than women. If Madame O'Neil had been present, she might, perhaps, have questioned and resisted still; but her son loved the young girl, and forgot all selfish interests at the sight of her grief. But when Mr. O'Neil offered her his arm to lead her to the *fiacre*, which was waiting on the road a few yards away, he darted forward jealously, and made her take his arm. "Shall I accompany you?" he whispered, as he assisted her to enter. But she shook her head; and the next instant Mr. O'Neil had jumped upon the box, and they were driving away at a furious pace. "We have but seven minutes to reach the station," he told the man. "Treble fare if you are in time."

And they were in time. The train was on the point of starting. Another half-minute would have made them late. Mr. O'Neil almost threw his companion into the nearest carriage. "It is fortunate: we should have had to wait an hour and a half for the next train," he said, drawing a long breath as they moved off.

Ethel had not opened her lips yet. "Tell me, — tell me about it all!" she said then at last.

Mr. O'Neil was moved with pity. He tried to take her hand; but she drew it

away hastily. Even sympathy seemed cruel then. "It was sudden," he said. "He seemed as well as usual till half-past ten or eleven o'clock, then something happened; they think a blood-vessel broke; he fainted: ever since he has been sinking."

"Why was I not told? Why did you not send for me? Did he not want me?" she asked in a low, fierce voice.

"He did want you. They sent at once; but there was a delay; nobody knew where you were. It was by chance that I heard from an acquaintance, who saw you at the station this morning, that you had gone to Monaco."

Ethel relapsed into silence. Her companion watched her anxiously: she looked so white and dazed, that he thought she must faint.

Suddenly a broken whisper came to him. "Are they afraid,—do they think he will die?" she asked with terror-stricken eyes.

He did not at once reply; then gravely and tenderly he said, "He is very ill. It is in God's hands."

Ethel asked no more. Oh, what a return-journey it was,—so slow, so drearily slow! The three-quarters of an hour which it occupied seemed to have doubled their length. The train seemed to creep along its beautiful narrow way between the green, wooded mountains, and the blue, peaceful, little bays, dotted with lazy fishing-boats languidly flapping their picturesque, dingy sails. Ethel sat gazing blankly at it all, seeing nothing; yet, afterwards, the pictures to which her eyes were blinded then recurred to her mind vividly and painfully, and she hated them.

At last they were at Nice. It was twenty minutes' drive from the station to the villa; but even that was over now. They had climbed up the steep bit of road, and the wheels of the *fiacre* were crunching the gravel upon the avenue. The windows were blazing away fiercely in the setting sun; long solemn shadows were lying on the ground; the birds were sleepily singing through the trees. "Wait!" Mr. O'Neil said to Ethel as they drew up at the foot of the terrace; but she had already jumped to the ground, and was flying up the steps.

"Wait!" he called out again after her. He might as well have spoken to the wind. She went in through the glass door. It was the shortest way. The large drawing-room was empty she thought at first; but it looked so strangely empty! it was so still and silent, filled with the red glow which was pouring brightly in through all the windows, that involuntarily she paused.

The next moment she had run hastily forward with a little cry. She had suddenly seen that her father was in his accustomed place, lying on the sofa near the fireplace. He was asleep: she never doubted that he was asleep, as he had been asleep this morning when she had stood by him, and felt it so hard to leave him. She stood by him again now, and noiselessly, for fear of disturbing him, knelt down to kiss him. She felt relieved: he must be better now that he slept. Suddenly she screamed; film came before her eyes; voices were buzzing in her ears; and pale, startled faces were coming towards her. But Ethel saw nothing but that serene, pale face before her, upon which the peace of death was resting.

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. O'NEIL was asleep, and Ethel was reading; that is to say, that she had a book open upon her knees. But the book was turned upside down, and the girl's eyes were gazing vacantly out through the French window into the pleasure-ground, where the bright flowers were drowsily hanging their heads, and the setting sun was tipping the tall fir-trees of Mount Drnid.

It was a pleasant room that they were in, long and low, half drawing-room, half library,—more of a library than a drawing-room, however; for books were everywhere,—in shelves, in cases, upon tables, piled up in corners, everywhere: so many and so varied, indeed, that Dr. O'Toole was in the habit of solemnly offering his word of honor, that the titles alone would be reading enough for rational people.

But there were not only books in the room, there were plenty of pretty things besides,—Florentine tables, Venetian glasses, rare bits of old china, and, better still, quantities of pretty flowers. In short, it was a pleasant room, interesting and home-like; such as people like to live in, and which they remember with tenderness when they live in it no longer.

Just now it was a very quiet room; extraordinarily so, Ethel thought, sitting motionless, and listening to the deep, solemn, intense silence which was that of a remote country-place far removed from either town or village, and, compared to which, other silences are filled with sound. Before very long, however, it was broken in upon suddenly. A quick step made

itself heard upon the gravelled walk of the pleasure-ground, quickly followed by the loud bark of a dog.

"Bless me!" cried Mrs. O'Neil, jumping up, and rubbing her eyes. "What on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing. It is only Max calling to me to go out," Ethel replied calmly; and she laid down her book, and rose from her seat. "Max ought to be taught better manners than to awake you so rudely," she added, with a compassionate smile at the old lady's disturbed countenance.

"Awake me, child! I was not asleep," she asserted testily. And Ethel knew her well enough by this time not to contradict her; for Mrs. O'Neil's after-dinner nap was one of the daily, inevitable events of her life, about which she was prone to indulge in a few innocent illusions. "I was not asleep," she repeated, — "no more than you were yourself. God knows," she went on ruefully, "that it is little enough one can sleep in one's bed, much less out of it, these dreadful times, when one is not sure whether one will wake up murdered or not. Oh, dear! oh, dear! to think of what those wicked Fenians are bringing Ireland to."

As we know of old, a bugbear was a necessary element of Mrs. O'Neil's existence. The bugbear just at present was the Fenians.

Ethel did her best to console her. "Mr. O'Neil says there are none in these parts," she assured her.

"Nonsense, child! How does he know? How does anybody know? Flaherty told me, only to-day, that people begin to see strange-looking men about the roads. And she told me something else besides," she went on mysteriously, — "she told me that she had heard from good authority that Paddy the groom, our Paddy's brother, — a good-for-nothing fellow, who went to America a year ago, — has turned Fenian, and that he will probably come back and cut all our throats for us some day. Of course, through Paddy he can learn all the ins and outs of the house, and do as he likes," she added in a melancholy tone.

Ethel was too well accustomed to these startling announcements to be much disturbed by them. She did not even tremble nor turn pale when Mrs. O'Neil asked her with thrilling solemnity, how she would like to have her head carried about the country on a pike.

"They will do it, child: they will do it yet to all of us! Flaherty says that she hears they have pikes concealed in all the cabins round about," the old lady went on impressively. "I declare, our lives are not

safe," she concluded, warming with the terrors of her subject. "Flaherty says so too; and it is a shame for Arthur, upon my word it is, to keep us down in these wild country parts during these dreadful times. It will be the death of me, I know it will!"

"But Mr. O'Neil proposed our leaving, did he not, if we were alarmed?" Ethel reminded her gently.

"To be sure he did, child, small thanks to him! What is the use of our going, if he would not come along with us? And he won't. He is as obstinate as a mule. He says it would look badly, and make a bad impression. As if it mattered a button what it looked, or what sort of an impression it made upon the poor savages we live amongst, provided only we escaped with our lives, and kept our heads upon our bodies. And of course I would not leave him, — not for all the world," she concluded heroically.

"I suppose not," Ethel said carelessly.

Mrs. O'Neil gave her a keen look. "You are not frightened yourself, child, are you? because, if you are, and you were to ask Arthur to —

"Frightened! oh, dear, no! There is nothing to be frightened about really, Mrs. O'Neil."

She spoke in a weary tone of indifference. Mrs. O'Neil's bright, tender eyes peered at her anxiously through the fading light. "You look as if you were frightened, or something, I know," the old lady remarked, after a little pause. "Child, when will you get your roses back? when will you look yourself again?" she inquired suddenly and plaintively.

Ethel was standing before her, leaning languidly against a chair. In her deep mourning dress, she did indeed look painfully white and frail; and, worse than that, there was a crushed and lifeless appearance about her, which was a terrible, startling contrast to the brightness and buoyancy of former days.

For a minute she made no answer. Then suddenly, with a sob and a gasp, "Oh! have patience with me; have patience with me!" she cried. "Oh! it is so short a time, so short a time! and my heart is broken. I tell you it is broken, Mrs. O'Neil." And with this piteous wail she ran from the room.

From the room out into the quiet, dim pleasure-ground, where wild pigeons were cooing softly, and sunset shadows were stretching across the soft, velvety turf. It was all very peaceful and pretty; but Ethel, fighting with a storm of passionate sorrow, saw or felt nothing of its peace and beauty.

Max, impatiently waiting for her, set up a noisy bark of welcome at her appearance. Max's master was there too; but he did not seem to be waiting for her, but, on the contrary, to be quite engrossed in pruning the refractory trailing branches of a laurel-tree, which were obtruding themselves across the path. He looked up, however, as she passed quite close to him, right into her face, and seemed about to speak. But he must have seen something in it to silence him; for he turned quickly away again, and let her go by without a word.

Max led the way. He knew it well; for Ethel's evening walks invariably took the same direction,—up through the thick plantations in which Mount Druid was buried, to the top of a hill, where they suddenly ceased, and whence a wide expanse of country was visible. It was a flat, dreary view; yet the girl liked it, and always breathed freer when she had escaped from the snug, shut-in little place down below, and she could feel the strong breeze sweeping across the wide, desolate plain. It was coming to-night, laden with a delicious freshness, across the distant mountains, and the immense stretches of dark Castle Garvagh woods, and the miles of purple brown bog, here and there variegated by a tiny patch of vivid green, where an acre of land had been reclaimed and cultivated, which were the principal features of the scene. Oh, how desolate, how strangely desolate, it all was!—the pale smoke of some miserable cabin, the faint bark of a distant dog, the rumbling of a cart on some far-away road, the only signs and sounds of life; no people, no crops, no cattle, no horses, no yellow cornfields, no happy, smiling homesteads; nothing but this bleak, silent expanse, and those pale mountains, and dark woods, and solemn, sad-looking sky, gazing down upon it all pitifully as it lay hushed, as it were, beneath the enchantment of some mysterious, melancholy spell.

Yet, desolate and dreary as the view was, Ethel had already grown fond of it. It suited her mood and frame of mind. She liked to sit with her face turned to the salt breeze, and to watch the day die out, and the dim light fade slowly away, and to strain her eyes in the attempt to catch sight of the big dark patch against the sky, which was the great house of Castle Garvagh, and in which that old man whose life was still so strangely prolonged, and upon whose death so many hopes and fears and passions and interests hung, was dragging out a solitary, joyless, mysterious existence.

Living still, but failing both in mind and body, yet clinging on to life with a tenacity

which seemed to mock at the impatience of those who were longing for his death; living on still when life had lost every joy but that of defying human calculations and human passions; living on still in that big, desolate house, with no companions but interested servants, no memories but those connected with the dead,—unloved, unbefriended, alone,—when around him on every side in the world young lives and young hopes and young affections were being uprooted, and scattered to the winds. Oh, strange secret of destiny! strange irony of fate! The old live, and the young die. The strong and happy are taken, and the weak and wretched are left; and all that remains to us is but to watch and marvel and submit.

Ethel, however, was not thinking much of Castle Garvagh or of its strange old master just now. Her mind was filled with but the one thought,—her grief. It was so short a time, as she had half an hour ago told Mrs. O'Neil; so short a time—only six or eight weeks—since that dreadful moment when she had looked upon her dead father's face. And, as she had also told Mrs. O'Neil, her heart was broken: at least she believed it was, as young people have, and always will have, a strange facility for believing. It had been a terrible shock and cruel grief,—so terrible and cruel, that her mind was completely stunned; and not even the curious and totally unexpected circumstances in which she was placed had been able to rouse her from the sort of torpor which sorrow had produced in her.

Curious circumstances, indeed! Here she was, by virtue of her father's last will, living at Mount Druid under the protection of Mr. O'Neil, whom the colonel's dying wishes had constituted her guardian till she should be of age,—an event which would not happen for more than a year and a half yet. How had it all come about? Nobody knew exactly; and Ethel, as yet passively indifferent and submissive, had never cared to inquire. What Mr. O'Neil knew was, that the colonel, finding himself to be dying, had implored of him to take charge of his daughter, and to save her, in spite of herself, from the fate into which she seemed bent upon rushing; and that he, in such a moment, could not, even if he had wished, have refused such a request. The consequences had followed as a matter of course. Ethel had no near relations except an uncle,—her father's elder brother, Gen. Mildmay,—who had lived all his life in India, and was still there. By the colonel's will, he and Arthur O'Neil were constituted the girl's

guardians; but as Col. Mildmay had left express directions that she was to await her uncle's return, and not to go out to India to him, her guardianship, for the present, fell entirely into Mr. O'Neil's hands, and she had no other home but with him.

Ethel had heard of, and had acquiesced in, the arrangements apathetically. If three months ago it had been prophesied to her, she would have considered it a simple impossibility. If sorrow had not made her indifferent to most things, she would perhaps have rebelled. But, as it was, grief and remorse made her strangely docile. Her father's dying eyes had sought for her in vain, his dying lips had called her to him, and she had come too late. His last moments had been made miserable, and through her. His death had perhaps been hastened by — But that thought Ethel could not bear. She could not let it near her. It made her almost mad. And yet it was there, ever there, and the girl was miserable.

How do people live through such times? Nobody knows, not even themselves. They live with a haunting heart-ache; with memory fraught with pain, with hope and joy crushed and extinguished by the overwhelming weight of present suffering. Dark, terrible times, in which life is a burden from which we pray and long to be delivered, living on, nevertheless, and gradually and insensibly becoming reconciled, or at least accustomed, to the absence of the loved face and the silence of the familiar voice, which death has robbed from us. Hard to live, and hard, too, to see living.

Dr. O'Toole was beginning to look perplexed and to grow a little impatient over the girl's pale, wan face, and lifeless ways. Mrs. O'Neil cried her bright eyes dim out of sympathy and pity, and now and then felt somewhat irritated and aggrieved by this passionate yet subdued grief, which all her love and tenderness could not allay. Mr. O'Neil alone did not lose patience. "Give her time," he always said; "give her time. It is too soon yet to expect any thing but this." And he said this again to his mother this evening, when, having watched Ethel's slender, dark figure till it had disappeared amongst the trees, he had gone indoors, and had found the old lady bemoaning the sudden and rare outburst into which the girl had been betrayed.

"She is worse than ever, Arthur; worse than ever," she declared despairingly. "The child will die if she goes on much longer after this fashion. Dear me! dear me! What a fool I was to be sure, ever to

have mixed myself up in the poor colonel's affairs, and to have been entrapped into having the child thrown upon us in this way. Just imagine if she dies upon our hands," she concluded pathetically.

"There is not the least fear of her dying," Mr. O'Neil replied hastily. "You know I told you, mother, long ago," he went on presently, "that you were doing an imprudent thing in yielding to the poor colonel's wishes, and taking upon yourself, even before his death, the charge of his daughter."

"And have I not told you a hundred times that there is not a more aggravating form of speech in the English language than that 'I told you so'?" retorted Mrs. O'Neil testily. "And I don't regret it a bit, not a bit: what I have done I mean," she went on belligerently. "How could I have acted otherwise? Now, how could I, Arthur? How could I have refused poor Henry that day when he asked me to come and take care of his child? If I had refused him, I would not have deserved to die a happy death. I do not regret it," she asserted again vehemently. Then, "Do you regret it, Arthur?" she inquired suddenly.

"No."

It was very promptly said, in a quick tone of decision, which could leave no doubt but that the little word came from his heart. His mother gave him a furtive look. With the contradiction of human nature, now that she had discovered that her son did not look upon Miss Mildmay's guardianship in the light of a grievance, she was disposed to do so herself. The moment she was quite sure that he did not mean to upbraid her for the important consequences her good-nature had entailed, she was rather inclined to pity and to upbraid herself.

"If only the child don't die on our hands! God knows, I never bargained for that," she observed plaintively.

Mr. O'Neil laughed.

"Dying! she is not thinking of it. She is only fretting. She will and must fret and suffer, poor little thing." And his voice softened involuntarily.

"That is all very well; but there is fretting and fretting," replied the old lady: "and such fretting as this I have never seen before."

"Her father is only eight weeks dead: it is too soon for her to forget,—much too soon. We must have patience, mother."

"The very thing she said herself just now, the dear child. And we will have patience; will we not, Arthur?" Mrs.

O'Neil inquired, her momentary irritation passing away, and her kind eyes beaming with softness and tenderness.

"I know you will, mother, for her poor father's sake."

"Yes, for her poor father's sake; for Henry loved *my* child once, and he would have made a good and kind husband' to her, had she chosen to marry him instead of that scamp who broke her heart for her afterwards. Oh, what fools women are, to be sure! What fools girls! — by the way" — But here Mrs. O'Neil paused abruptly.

Her son was turning over the pages of a book; but now he looked up sharply.

"Well, mother?"

"I wonder," went on the old lady doubtfully, "whether the child can be still hankering after that fellow, — Denis Irwin's son, you know? Do you think she can be silly enough, wicked enough, to be fretting about that?"

"How can I say? You ought to know better than I can, mother."

"I know nothing. She never speaks upon the subject. I have never heard her mention his name since. I can't make the girl out," concluded the old lady petulantly.

Mr. O'Neil was silent for a minute. Then he said thoughtfully, "No: I hardly think that she is fretting about that. But suppose you try to make out, mother?"

"How can I? What can I do? The girl is so hard to 'get at.' It is as if she were turned into ice or stone. Besides, where is the use of talking of that — that impostor? She can't marry him. Of course, she cannot. Her poor papa's ghost would haunt her to her dying-day if she did such a thing; and besides — besides, so long as she is under *our* protection, Arthur," Mrs. O'Neil said, drawing herself up to her full height, and her bright eyes sparkling, "those people will not presume to come near her, I should think."

Her son laughed. "They will be very courageous if they do. You will be a match for your daughter-in-law, mother."

"To be sure I will, and for twenty daughters-in-law, if I had them. Ah, Arthur! how long will you keep me waiting before you give me one that I can love and like? Now, there is Alice Redfern, who, Flaherty tells me (and she knows it through Mrs. Redfern's old housekeeper, who is in all the family secrets), is dying for you. Dr. O'Toole says it too," she added with a mysterious nod.

Mr. O'Neil reddened slightly, and laughed. "It is very kind of Miss Redfern, I am sure; but" — and he paused for

an instant. "Mother," he went on gravely, "I have told it to you before a hundred times, and I repeat it now, and you may believe me, I don't mean to marry for the present — perhaps never. At all events, I shall not marry until I know whether I am to be the owner of Castle Garvagh or not."

He spoke with the quiet determination of a man whose mind is made up. Mrs. O'Neil groaned, and wrung her hands.

"And when will that be?" she asked. "God's ways are dark. When will that be, Arthur?"

He sighed wearily. "Heaven only knows. The old man may live for years. And yet, if I only win in the end, all that has gone before will matter little."

"If? Arthur, if?" —

"If?" he repeated. Then suddenly, "I will win, mother. I must. A man can bear to be disappointed in many things, but for the dream, the desire, of his whole life to be disappointed! Oh, no! that is impossible!"

As Mrs. O'Neil had told her son, she had never heard Ethel mention Count O'Neil's name since the day of her father's death. Of what her feelings towards him were, the old lady was in profound ignorance; so was Mr. O'Neil. The girl's behavior was a mystery which neither of them could solve. Her apathy was a sort of coat-of-mail through which it seemed impossible to pierce. Yet once since he had become her guardian, Mr. O'Neil had almost pierced through it. Once, and only once, the girl had been momentarily roused into a faint likeness of the Ethel of old.

It was the day of her father's funeral. That morning they had carried him to the beautiful Nice churchyard, and had laid him in his grave. The *jalousies* of the Villa Balbi had been thrown open once more, and the sun poured into the large rooms with a mocking brightness that seemed to defy all memories of sorrow or death, — into all the rooms except the one in which he had lain back on the sofa in weary, impatient expectation of his daughter's coming, and had died. That room Ethel would not allow to be disturbed. She would not allow a chair to be moved, nor a book, nor a flower. As his eyes had last looked upon it, she prayed that, so long as it was possible, it might remain.

All the associations which met together in it were gathered tightly round about her heart, and she could not bear that one of them should be uprooted. They could hardly get her to leave it herself. Here she lay for hours, motionless, with her eyes

wide open, gazing with a startled, horror-stricken expression, which was painful to see, upon the spot in which she had first seen her father dead, with the setting sun shining upon his face.

It was afternoon now. A few hours ago, Col. Mildmay's will had been read in her presence, and she had heard, apparently without surprise or interest, that Mr. O'Neil had been appointed her guardian.

Mrs. O'Neil had kissed her, and wept over her, and had promised to be a mother to her. Mr. O'Neil had said little, but that little was earnest and kind. And then he had asked her what her wishes were, and whether she had any objection to live at Mount Druid with his mother for the summer. Ethel had opened her weary eyes in surprise, and said, that of course she had no objection; that she did not care where they brought her to live. And to every question it was the same reply. Questions indeed seemed merely to weary her. Whatever suited Mrs. O'Neil would suit her. The single symptom of a wish that they could extract from her was one that they should leave Nice as quickly as possible.

And so it had been arranged that they were to leave it in a few days. The house was astir with preparation. Boxes were being packed, last arrangements made. Everybody was busy but Ethel, who lay in the darkened room alone with her sorrow.

Mrs. O'Neil had been obliged to drive into the town to see after the poor orphan's mourning; and thus it was, that, except the servants, Mr. O'Neil and Ethel were the only two in the house. It was five o'clock. For two hours the girl had been quite undisturbed. Mr. O'Neil had not come near her. Indeed, since her father's death, he had hardly seen her, and never alone; and now, when he knocked at the door, and entered the room, there was an unwonted hesitation and uncertainty in his face and manner that showed that he was as yet very far from at home in his new rôle of guardian.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Miss Mildmay," he said; "but"—

Ethel hardly took the trouble to move. It was by the faintest sign that she acknowledged his presence.

He paused for an instant, looking at her. Then he said, "I must ask you to let me speak to you for a moment."

He spoke very quietly and gently, yet with a tone of decision which seemed faintly to surprise her. And it must have influenced her too; for she raised herself, and bowed her head.

He handed her a card then. "This gentleman is here. Do you wish to see him?" he inquired.

It was Count O'Neil's card. Ethel hardly gave it a glance. "No! oh, no!" she said vehemently.

"He is very anxious to see you. He—What am I to say to him?" Mr. O'Neil inquired suddenly in a voice of the profoundest and most miserable perplexity, which, under less melancholy circumstances, would have been ludicrous in the extreme.

"I don't know or care. Of course I can't see him. How could I see him?" Ethel said piteously, and nervously clasping a letter which she held in her hand, and which was the half-finished letter she had seen on her father's table the morning she had left him. It was to herself, and had caused her perhaps the sharpest pang of grief she had yet felt; for it was the letter of a father to a child whom he adores. Like herself, he had tried to write explanations which he had not known how to speak. In it he had told her of Count O'Neil's proposal and his refusal; and he had implored of her, in language too pathetic to be resisted, to yield to him in this one thing, and to trust her happiness to him. But the letter had never been finished, and what was written of it she had never read till too late. Too late, — too late! Those only know the bitterness of that cry who owe reparation to the dead.

"How could I see him?" Ethel demanded almost fiercely of her guardian.

"You shall not see him, then," he replied promptly, and with some involuntary tenderness. "You shall see nobody whom you do not like. But— but what am I to say to him?" he inquired again.

"Tell him to go away. Tell him that I am ill. I am ill," she said wearily, and closing her eyes.

"He will not believe me," Mr. O'Neil said shortly.

"Why?"

"Because — because he knows, I suppose, that I am your guardian, and he will imagine that I am exercising my authority to prevent you seeing him."

"Your authority?" And the faintest possible shade of color rose slowly in her white cheeks.

"Yes."

There was a brief pause, during which they looked into one another's eyes, for the first time, perhaps, measuring each other's strength. Ethel's eyes fell the first. "Tell him that it is of my own free will that I do not choose to see him," she said then.

Mr. O'Neil made a step towards the door,

then he turned back. "Would you have any objection to write a line to him?" he asked. "It will be more convincing than my words."

"Oh! where is the use? Why do you tease me?" she burst out impatiently.

"Only a line—on his own card. It will not take you an instant," he persisted.

There was another little outburst. But she rose and came to the table, and took the pencil which he offered her. "It is unkind, it is cruel, of you to tease me!" But she obeyed him for all that, kneeling down by the table, and scribbling off a few hasty words. "There!" and she handed him the card. "I suppose you have the right to read it," she said with a sudden flash in her poor, tear-dimmed eyes.

"I have neither the right nor the inclination," Mr. O'Neil had answered quietly as he left the room.

And that was all. Count O'Neil had made one or two more attempts to see the girl; but they were equally fruitless. He had written to her, and she had answered him; but what he had written, or what she had answered, she had not informed her guardian. Madame O'Neil, probably aware of the clause of her father's will which had forbidden his daughter to marry without her guardian's consent till she came of age, made no sign.

A few days later the Villa Balbi was deserted. Strangers had come; but they had gone again, leaving one behind. Silence reigned through the empty rooms. Memories haunted them; but those to whom those memories were dear were far away. The moon looked down upon the pretty garden, and crept stealthily, as of old, through the dim, shadowy alleys: but the alleys were deserted now; no footsteps echoed along them; no tender whispers stole through the trees. Hopes and fears, passions and clashing interests, all alike had fled. Death had passed on his solemn way, and had left his cold, marble touch behind.



CHAPTER XXI.

AT last, however, even Mr. O'Neil began to lose patience, or, to speak more correctly, to grow a little alarmed. Ethel had now been with them two months: spring had deepened into summer, and there was as yet no sign of the resuscitation for which they were all so anxiously watching.

"What is the matter with her, doctor?"

he one day inquired of Dr. O'Toole, the family friend and physician, who seldom let a day go by without a call at Mount Druid, and, on the rare occasions when he ventured to do so, was invariably sent for, on some pretext or other, by Mrs. O'Neil.

Dr. O'Toole was an honest man, and was not in the habit of inventing diseases to account for perplexing symptoms. And so now he replied with the utmost candor, "I give you my word, sir, that I don't know what the matter with the girl is. Nothing in the world, I'd take my oath. But, for all that, she'll go off in decline if this work goes on much longer," he announced, taking a copious pinch of snuff. Mr. O'Neil started violently. "Decline!" he repeated. "Doctor, you are not serious?"

"Upon my word, sir, I am. At her age, chits of girls fall into decline as readily as they fall in love; that is, when there are any predisposing causes. And the mother, I hear, died of something of the sort. If the child won't eat or drink, or stir herself up, or do any thing from morning till night but mope and pine, the end of it will be, as sure as my name is John O'Toole, that she'll mope and pine herself into the next world before a twelvemonth." And Dr. O'Toole gave an emphatic thump to the floor, with the stout stick which was his invariable companion.

"What is to be done?" Mr. O'Neil presently inquired in dismay.

"Stick pins into her," said the doctor curtly. "They'd do her a world of good."

"Let us be serious, doctor, for Heaven's sake. What is to be done really? Ought she to be sent away? Perhaps travelling, or change, or—" —

"Bosh, sir!" interrupted the doctor. "Has she not been travelling and changing, and gadding about the world? These new-fangled notions of travelling and changing are great humbug, to my mind. Much travelling and change our grandmothers got, indeed!" he went on vehemently; "and a finer lot of women it would be hard to find on the face of the earth,—worth twenty of your slim, puny, tight-laced girls of the present day. No, sir! I say that any girl that can't thrive in the splendid air of Mount Druid, and into whose cheeks the Atlantic breezes don't blow as fine a pair of roses as you'd see in a day's walk,—I say that that girl is"—

"Is what?" Mr. O'Neil inquired, as the worthy man paused, at a loss for a word.

"Is a mystery beyond me. I give it up."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. O'Neil rather sharply. "Doctor, you are croaking. The poor child is only fretting. It is too soon

to expect her to have recovered the terrible shock she received," he added kindly.

"True enough, sir,—true enough. I am not disputing that point. I am only giving it as my opinion, that, if she goes on fretting at this rate, I'll not answer for the consequences. Can't you rouse her up a bit?" he inquired. "I am always telling Mrs. O'Neil that she ought to give her a sound scolding, instead of this perpetual petting and pitying work that goes on. It would be better that the girl should feel angry than that she should feel nothing at all. Now, sir, you, as her guardian, ought to speak seriously to her. Upon my word you ought," concluded the doctor solemnly, as he rose to depart.

"As if I could—as if I would in the very least know what to say to her," Mr. O'Neil said ruefully. Then he laughed. "I should be a bad hand at scolding, doctor."

"Scolding pretty girls, you mean, eh, Arthur?" said Dr. O'Toole with a sly wink. "There is another idea I have got," he went on with a still more emphatic wink. "There is young Redfern now, as find a young man as there is in the country. Supposing we set about making a match between them. It sometimes happens, that, when old fogies like me are at their wits' ends, young sparks can see what's wrong, and set it right in a twinkling. I have known more than one case like this," he concluded solemnly, "cured by a lover. Now, what do you say to that, sir?"

"I say that—that it is much too soon for any thing of the sort," replied Mr. O'Neil promptly and with considerable dryness. "Miss Mildmay is not thinking of lovers just now. She is thinking of her father."

"Yes. But she ought not to be let think about him,—in this way I mean. The man is dead and buried, and there is no help for it. It is her mind, sir, that is diseased,—diseased and morbid; and it is for that the remedy is to be got. Besides, are you quite sure that it is only of her father that she is thinking?" inquired the doctor with a shrewd look.

A sharp expression of pain crossed Mr. O'Neil's face. "You mean that she is, perhaps, grieving over that unfortunate affair?" he observed shortly. "I can't give you information on the subject, doctor. Miss Mildmay does not favor me with any tender confidences."

"Hum," said the doctor thoughtfully. "There is no better remedy for an old love than a new one. That is my experience. However, it is just what I say. It is the

mind that is diseased; and how that is to be mended is the question,—whether by making the girl hate somebody or like somebody, I leave to yourself." Whereupon Dr. O'Toole, without another word, made a sudden bolt from the room, which was his peculiar method of taking leave.

That evening Ethel came out as usual for her walk. Almost every evening at the same hour, since she had come to Mount Druid, this solitary walk came off,—solitary, but for the companionship of Max, which never failed her. It was a curious sort of arrangement that had been tacitly come to for the disposal of the evening by Ethel and her guardian. He went out directly after dinner; while she remained in the drawing-room with Mrs. O'Neil, who invariably fell asleep in five minutes, leaving her companion free to dream a sad hour away. In about an hour, Max's bark would rouse her; and she, in her turn, would go out, meeting Mr. O'Neil in the pleasure-ground, where, as often as not, they would pass each other by without a single word.

By this time Max was thoroughly at home in this arrangement. Once released from his attendance on his master, he understood that his duty was to follow and protect his master's ward—a duty which appeared to afford him supreme satisfaction. He was, however, too faithful and intelligent an animal to perform it without express permission; and thus it was that he seldom forgot to consult Mr. O'Neil with a glance, which was as eloquent as any words could be, before, with a satisfied wag of his tail, he trotted off at Miss Mildmay's heels.

Neither Ethel nor Max scented mischief in the air to-night. Yet mischief was brewing,—brewing diligently in Mr. O'Neil's brain; while the doctor's words—"She must be made either to hate or like somebody"—were ringing in his ears. He had thought much over them that day; he was thinking of them now, as he sat calmly smoking his cigar in the quiet pleasure-ground, and looking towards the glass door through which Ethel generally came out. She was coming now. Somehow Mr. O'Neil's heart failed him a little when he saw her. She looked so white and weary; her step was so languid and lifeless; she was so changed, so cruelly changed, from the bright, joyous, pretty girl whom he had first seen only a few months ago on the Promenade at Nice,—that a great fear suddenly took possession of him, that, after all, there might be some truth in what he had contemptuously

called Dr. O'Toole's croaking. Something else took possession of him too,—had indeed had possession of him for some time,—something that made the blood rush to his face for an instant, and then leave it again suddenly, when he saw the girl coming towards him.

She was as usual going into the woods, and, to do so, must pass him by. Max was stretched at his feet in comfortable contentment, waiting for her, and ready to "fall in" as she passed. Mr. O'Neil waited, too, very quietly. She was quite close to him now. But though he rose politely, and made her a little inclination, it seemed as though she had not even seen him; for she went on her way without a word or a sign. Her guardian's eyes followed her for an instant. Max's eyes were fixed upon his, waiting for the accustomed signal of permission, which, however, for the first time, failed to-night. The dog had started up, and was panting to be off. He had even made a bound forward, when his master's voice—a voice that he had never as yet disobeyed—called him back, and ordered him to lie down again at his feet. It was all done in half a second. Ethel as yet had not had time to reach the little iron gate which separated the pleasure-ground from the plantation; and, until she did so, she never thought of looking behind her. But, when she had reached it, she did look back, and saw Max, devouring her with his eyes, but submissively crouched on the very spot which Mr. O'Neil had pointed out to him. Miss Mildmay was astonished, but nothing more. No suspicion of the truth had as yet dawned upon her; nor did it for a moment or two, till, having twice called Max, she made the discovery that a higher authority was detaining him.

What was to happen next? Mr. O'Neil felt very curious and a little anxious about it. Ethel herself was hesitating, with a tinge of color in her cheek, and a faint flash of the old, rebellious sparkle in her eye that he knew so well. What would she do? The girl was debating the question in her mind,—whether would she comport herself with the dignity of indifference, and continue her walk without making any further attempt to persuade Max to accompany her, or would she boldly enter the lists, and see whether the dog would not obey her as readily as he obeyed his master. Her first impulse was the former plan. Of late, all Ethel's belligerent inclinations seemed to have been extinguished, and the girl was in no mood for a trial of strength. She only wanted

to be "left alone" she thought; and the fiery will of former days was, she was silly enough to fancy, utterly crushed and broken. Her guardian was half afraid that it was crushed and broken, too, for a moment. But only for a moment. Her hesitation was a brief one. The woods were dusky and solitary; and Max's companionship gave her a sense of security which she did not feel disposed to dispense with. Poor Ethel was nervous and timid now; and, though she laughed at Mrs. O'Neil's terrors and alarms, it was not so very difficult to startle and frighten herself. Besides, what did Mr. O'Neil mean? What did he mean by sitting there in an attitude, as she irritably imagined, expressive of the pleasant consciousness of a serene sense of power, calmly puffing at his cigar, and, with such quiet resolution, exercising his authority over the dog? What did he mean?

All at once Ethel's heart gave a great angry bound, and she suddenly resolved to find out.

And so she turned back a few steps, and came a little nearer. "Max," she called out in clear tones, "Max."

There was a little pause. The dog's eyes were starting out of his head. His tail was wagging madly with desperation. He was panting to obey. And yet—and yet; the old love was stronger than the new. Max did not stir.

Nearer still came Miss Mildmay, then—back—within a few yards of her guardian. "You will not let the dog come with me, Mr. O'Neil,—will you not?" she inquired sharply.

"Am I preventing him, Miss Mildmay?" "It appears so. I know you are," a little breathlessly.

"Do you? But surely you can make him obey you, can you not?" he asked with some quiet satire, which put the finishing stroke to her temper.

"Max, come! Max!" she called again and again. But in vain. She was defeated. With a little secret pride she had believed in the dog's attachment to her. With a little secret complacency she had gloried in the delusion that she had stolen some of his fidelity and affection from his master. And now this was the result. This ignominious exposure was the end of her imaginary little triumph.

"You see that I cannot. You are preventing him coming with me, Mr. O'Neil," she broke out passionately.

"Some people say that dogs have souls, and I am inclined to subscribe to the belief," Mr. O'Neil observed calmly. "Max!

Good dog! Good old fellow!" And he bent down and patted the animal affectionately.

This was a little too much, and would have roused slower tempers than Ethel's. Hers was fairly roused now, at all events. "You are very unkind and rude. What do you mean, Mr. O'Neil?" she inquired angrily, almost tearfully.

"I have been very uneasy of late," said Mr. O'Neil with a pleasant smile, and gently pinching his dog's ears; "very uneasy, indeed; but now I am quite happy again. My faith was tottering; for, if I did not believe in and trust Max, I would neither believe in nor trust any body or any thing. And I have actually been black enough to distrust Max,—just a little,—fancy that, old fellow! There, I may as well make my confession to you! I was actually beginning to distrust you. I was actually beginning to feel suspicious and jealous, Max. I was beginning to fancy that a new love had driven the old one out of your heart, and that a young and pretty lady had, as young and pretty ladies so often do, made you false and fickle. Max, I am ashamed of my unworthy suspicions, and I beg your pardon most humbly,—I do indeed!" concluded Mr. O'Neil solemnly.

The pallor of Ethel's cheeks had pretty well disappeared by the time that this harangue had come to an end. She was rosily red with indignation.

"There! I knew that you had done it on purpose; I knew you had," she burst out. "You are very unkind, Mr. O'Neil,—very cruel and unkind."

"Am I, Miss Mildmay? But was it not unkind of you to try to steal the dog's heart away from me?"

"I did not try to steal it. I don't care whether he is fond of me or not." Then there was a strangled little sob and a gasp. "Yes, you are very unkind, when I am so lonely; when I have nobody in the whole world to care for."

Probably she had not meant him to hear the piteous plaint; for she had turned sharply from him, and, with nervous, hasty steps, was walking across the soft green grass. But he did hear it for all that; and, after a brief moment of indecision, he had overtaken her, and was by her side. "Nobody in the whole world to care for!" he repeated dryly yet kindly. "That is not a kind speech, Miss Mildmay."

She turned on him a little fiercely. "Who is there to care for?" she asked.

"My mother, for one: how can you help caring for her when she loves you as though you were her child?"

"Ah, but she does not; she cannot! It is not the same thing; you *know* that it is not! O papa, papa!" she cried.

Mr. O'Neil was silent for a moment or two; they were walking very fast up through the dim woods; for Ethel, half-blinded with tears, had instinctively taken the path which she was accustomed to take every evening.

"Then," said Mr. O'Neil after a pause, "you ought to care for me a little,—just a little,—being your guardian, you know."

"For you?"

And, though his face flushed at the tone in which it was said, his sense of the ludicrous made him half smile.

"Yes, for me!" he repeated quietly. "Guardians are included in the third commandment."

"No, they are not!" very promptly said.

"Are they not? Well, I am not much of a theologian, and so I will not be positive. But, if I yield you that point, I am sufficiently acquainted with the rules of society to know that politeness and common civility are due to everybody, guardians even included."

Ethel's eyes were flashing; but she was puzzled and curious too.

"What do you mean?" she demanded sharply.

"What I say."

"I don't understand, then."

"Do you not? Well, I will try to explain. Will you allow me to ask you a question? and will you promise me a candid reply?"

"I generally do give candid replies."

"And you promise to give my question one?"

"Of course."

"Then, here it is. Do you consider it a civil or a polite thing for a young lady night after night to come out, to pass her guardian without a word or a look, even when he invariably takes the trouble of saluting her, to possess herself, without leave or license, of his dog, and to march off in solitary dignity, and with an air of determination which clearly says 'I will not be followed?'"

"But supposing she prefers,—much prefers being alone?" But notwithstanding the cruelty of the words, a faint shadow of a smile, which her companion detected quickly enough, was lurking about the corners of her mouth.

"Pray, is that what you call a candid reply to my question?" he inquired.

Ethel stopped short, and turned round full upon him, looking a little like an

animal driven to bay. "I must admit that I do not consider it a very civil or polite thing to do," she said slowly and with great deliberation.

"Ah! I thought not: neither do I. Well, and that is what you have been doing to me, Miss Mildmay, for the last two months and more. Now, I put it to you, is it very astonishing that I should resent such treatment at last?"

"No: at least, I suppose not."

"You suppose not? But I know that it is not. I can feel as well as you, and my feelings can as little bear to be trampled upon as your own."

He had begun calmly and lightly, almost, indeed, jestingly; but his manner had suddenly changed. In his turn, he was excited and angry.

Ethel gave him a further glance of amazement; to tell the truth, she was a little frightened too.

"But what is the meaning of it all? where is it all to end?" she inquired sharply.

They had reached the top of the hill now, and had emerged suddenly upon the bleak, desolate expanse which lay beneath it and over which the dark shadows of night were slowly creeping.

Mr. O'Neil did not at once reply: he was looking, as he always first looked from this spot, towards the distant purple line of the Castle Garvagh woods.

"Where is it all to end?" he repeated suddenly, after a pause, as though he had been awakened from a dream,— "where is it all to end? It will end by your falling into bad health, and dying, if you will not try to rouse yourself; if you will not try to grow a little happy again," he said vehemently, yet tenderly.

The girl started. The announcement was, to say the least of it, slightly abrupt and outspoken. "Die!" she repeated then passionately. "I don't care: I should be glad to die; I hope that I shall die!" And then she burst into a passion of sobs and tears.

Mr. O'Neil let her weep and sob away. What could he do? what could he say? how could he comfort her? She little suspected then, how he longed to comfort her, the burning words that were trembling on his lips, the passionate consolations that he would so readily have offered her,— how could she have suspected them? He stood apart; and he bit his lips; and he looked at her with gloomy, devouring eyes, in which the girl never saw the slumbering passion ready to start into life. It was just as well so. Mr. O'Neil could only

comfort her in one way, or not attempt to comfort her at all; and the silence of deep pity was about the best consoler Ethel could have been offered just then.

And so she wept and sobbed till she was too breathless and exhausted to weep and sob any more. Then Mr. O'Neil came over to her, where she was sitting upon her accustomed seat, — a moss-covered rock. "You may not care much about dying yourself, just now," he said gently; "but I care; my mother cares: for our sake will you not try to be a little happier?"

"How can I, how can I, be happy ever again? Don't you know how I loved him?" she asked passionately.

"Yes!"

"And how he loved me! I was his only one, his only child,—his heart's darling, as he so often called me. We were always together, always," she wailed.

"I know it all: I do, indeed! Yet he would be the first to wish you not to forget him, indeed, but not to regret him so hopelessly and passionately."

"But how can I help it, how can I?" and then her voice sank. "And if it were only that,—if it were only regret, and not remorse too!"

It was a whisper; but he heard it, he must have heard it, for he was bending down over her: and now he ventured, with a certain tenderness, to touch her hand.

"He has forgiven you, you may be sure of that," he said softly.

"But I am not sure of it; I do not believe it: at all events, I can never, never, forgive myself."

"Never is a long word," said Mr. O'Neil. "Besides, you must not exaggerate, it is foolish," he went on a little sharply, "and does no good. There were mistakes and misunderstandings on both sides, as your father knew himself."

"Did he? do you think he did? But I killed him for all that!"

"Nonsense! that is utter nonsense," said Mr. O'Neil very decidedly, — "pernicious nonsense too. You did nothing of the sort. He was dying—we all knew that he was dying—for months."

"And I did not know it!"

"Oh, how the past rose up before her then,—that sunny, careless, inexplicable past, in which she had been so strangely, so extraordinarily blind! With what a rush of vivid color did it all come back upon her!—the white villa, with the sunset making its windows glow like furnaces,

and the fragrant garden, and the glimpses of the shining sea, and the valley, and the great snowy Alps.

They all had known it! Mr. O'Neil and his mother, and the baron, and the Delneuves, and Madame O'Neil and her son. Every chance and passing acquaintance had known it; he himself had known it; and she alone — his child, his heart's darling — had been ignorant, thoughtlessly, heartlessly ignorant: the thought stabbed her through and through, causing her exquisite pain.

"And I did not know it!" she repeated. And the girl covered her face with her small, wasted hands, and wept again. Before long, however, she looked up through her tears. "Why did nobody tell me?" she asked passionately: then, without waiting for a reply, — her voice fell a little, — "Did Madame O'Neil know that papa was so ill?" she inquired.

Mr. O'Neil's face darkened. "Of course she must have known it," he replied shortly.

"And yet" —

There was a pause. Ethel's eyes were gazing vacantly before her towards the west, where dark banks of clouds hung over the horizon; the chill sea-breeze was sweeping with a low, sobbing sound across the plain, right into her face, and through her pretty fair hair. It was a cold, damp wind; and perhaps it was that that made her shiver, for she did shiver suddenly from head to foot.

"You are cold?" Mr. O'Neil said in a voice which seemed all at once to have altered, and to have become strangely stern and constrained.

"Yes: I believe so." And with a little weary sigh she rose from her seat. They turned homewards in silence, but had only gone a few steps when Mr. O'Neil stopped again. "Miss Mildmay, as your guardian I believe I have a right to make you a question, which, under any other circumstances, would be an impertinent one: you are, of course, at liberty to answer it or not, as you please.

He paused, and looked at her hesitatingly. Her face expressed surprise, and nothing more.

"May I make it?" he went on.

"Yes."

But he did not make it, after all. "Dr. O'Toole," he said, "told me to-day," suddenly walking on again, and speaking very fast, "that he feared that it was not grief for your father alone which was making you so ill, but that you were also grieving for something — rather for *somebody else*."

"Dr. O'Toole is — is very impertinent," Miss Mildmay replied with considerable vehemence.

Then the question came at last.

"But — is it true?" Mr. O'Neil asked quietly.

She did not at once reply, perhaps not for half a minute; then she said deliberately, "No, it is not true!" and she repeated the words a second time thoughtfully, — "No, it is not true!"

"I am glad of it."

And he said it with such deep heartiness, almost, indeed, passion, that Ethel gave a sudden start of alarm.

But Mr. O'Neil had already recovered himself. "Because," he went on presently in a studiously measured voice which completely re-assured her, "I think that it is, perhaps, my duty to remind you, that though, for the present, you are not free to marry without my approval, that is, — which in this particular instance," and he laughed a constrained little laugh, "I could hardly be expected to give, — when you come of age, which will be, I believe, in about eighteen months, you will be your own mistress, and at liberty to do as you please. Eighteen months is not such a very long time to wait," he added rather dryly.

"Mr. O'Neil!"

"Miss Mildmay!"

"Mr. O'Neil," Ethel burst out angrily, "what do you think I am made of? what sort of a girl do you suppose me to be? Do you seriously imagine that after — after the dreadful thing that has happened, I could ever for a moment think of marrying Count O'Neil?"

"One forgets every thing in this life," Mr. O'Neil replied with dry sadness. "In eighteen months, — pooh! in half that time."

"But I tell you that I shall never forget, never!" Ethel cried passionately. "The past is dead and gone; it can never return: besides —"

What would he not have given to have known the meaning of that "besides," to have heard the strange confession that had almost passed the girl's lips! But some instinct drove it back, — an instinct that warned her, just in time, that her guardian's ears were not precisely the ones to which she could confide the perplexing riddles of her heart, — riddles which she as yet hardly knew how to read herself.

"Besides," Ethel said tantalizingly, and she said no more: they had reached the house, and she went in without another word.

CHAPTER XXII.

ETHEL had told her guardian in all sincerity that she longed to die. Yet, when she came to think about it, she found out that this was a mistake, and that life (though just now it seemed to be a cheerless and perplexing sort of business enough) still possessed too great a hold upon her to be parted with so lightly. It was the very next morning that she came to this conclusion : it was a fine summer's morning, and the happy birds singing merrily through the woods reminded her suddenly that in the world's economy there still did exist such an element as happiness ; and that, beyond the narrow horizon of her own personal troubles and sorrows, there might possibly be a region in which hope and joy still flourished. That they did not, nor ever could again, flourish for her she did not as yet dream of doubting : it was too soon for that. But as in bodily illness a great step towards recovery is made when the invalid first recollects the fact that there is a world beyond the world contained within the walls of his sick-room, so in diseases of the heart and mind, when we once recognize, that, outside the tiny circle of feelings and sensations of which we ourselves are the axis, many other circles are ceaselessly revolving, our friends may congratulate themselves, and confidently trust that we are improving.

Ethel was nineteen and a pretty girl ; and so it is not to be wondered at that a glance in her mirror was the immediate cause of the little shock which produced this sudden revolution in her sentiments about dying. The girl had not had many sins of vanity of which to accuse herself of late : others had seen clearly enough how pale and worn and altered she was looking ; but she herself had seen nothing of it at all, or, at all events, the spectacle had made no manner of impression on her mind. Her beauty had become a matter of no importance to her, at least so she thought. It might die and be decently buried, and not a tear could be spared to shed over its grave.

To-day, however, something like a vague, regretful alarm started into life within her as she looked into the glass, and saw her visage reflected there. Ethel was at all times a frail, delicate-looking girl, whom grief did not become half as well as joy ; and now, when she saw the work which grief had wrought, — the white, thin cheeks, the dark rings under the eyes, and the cloudy, listless expression of those same sweet eyes, of whose power she had been

but a little while ago so proud, — she turned abruptly away, from the dolorous contemplation with a sharp sense of melancholy irritation, which was rather a startling contradiction to the stony indifference she professed.

"I am pretty no longer," she thought to herself. "Where can it all have gone to ?" And then she looked timorously and a little shyly again, searching anxiously for the charms which had been so often reflected back into her laughing eyes.

"I am pretty no longer," she concluded solemnly after a moment or two of grave, intent observation ; and it must be confessed that Ethel was not stoical enough to come to the conclusion without experiencing a very sharp and decided pang of regret.

At nineteen, however, despair is a rare and incongruous vice. Perhaps Ethel, in spite of the important decision which she had just come to, did not as yet utterly despair. Perhaps it was because some spark of hope still lingered within her, that, a day or two afterwards, she astonished them all by suddenly appearing equipped in riding-gear.

"I am going to ride," she announced laconically. "They have put my saddle on the bay pony, and I am going to try how he will carry me."

Now, Miss Mildmay's riding had been, it must be known, a stone of contention at Mount Druid. Dr. O'Toole had ordered riding, and her guardian had counselled it. Exercise of some sort, it had been decreed, was necessary for the girl's health ; and riding was the exercise she was most accustomed to : but no orders or entreaties had availed to induce her to resume it. The very fact of its having been such a pleasant habit in the old life had made it seem impossible to her to ride without the companionship which could never be hers again.

And so she had obstinately refused to ride till to-day, when those who took an interest in her had given the matter up as hopeless, and had ceased to importune her on the subject.

"I am going to try how the bay pony will carry me," she informed Mr. O'Neil, meeting him by chance on the staircase, and looking at him with an unconcerned air, as though the proceeding were the most natural one in the world.

"Indeed ! are you ?" He was betrayed into a momentary eagerness ; but he recovered his composure at once. "Tinker will carry you well enough," he went on coolly. "He ought to be pretty well trained by this time."

Mr. O'Neil was certainly qualified to give an opinion on the matter, since Tinker's training had been prosecuted under his own careful supervision. Ethel had one day, a month ago, chanced to say, when they were urging her to ride, that, if she rode at all, she would like to mount a quiet pony upon which it would be safe for her to go about alone; and her guardian had at once searched for such an animal, and, not having been able to find the perfection he required ready-made, had diligently set about making it. The result was Tinker, — not exactly perhaps, as yet, the perfection which he would have wished, but still near enough to it for him to make no opposition to his ward's sudden fancy.

"Tinker ought to be pretty well trained by this time," he said; and Miss Mildmay passed him by without vouchsafing him a single word of thanks for the thoughtful kindness which had been so eagerly ready to gratify her slightest wish.

The ride that day was a success. Tinker distinguished himself, and proved a "darling." At least, so Ethel declared, coming in after a while with some of the old color in her cheeks and the old sparkle in her eyes, which made Mrs. O'Neil coo with delight, and tell her that she looked a different girl. "You must ride every day now, child," she said. "I will not let you off a single one. It is the best thing in the world for you, and so Dr. O'Toole has said all along." *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.* Persuasion was not further needed. Every day Tinker became a greater favorite, — not because he turned out, on closer acquaintance, to be the model animal which Mr. O'Neil would have selected, for he was no lamb, but, on the contrary, a spirited little horse, which required a good nerve and clever management; but, the Rubicon once crossed, Ethel found, and was proud to find, that she could ride as well as of old, and was glad that Tinker should give her something to do, instead of allowing her to fall asleep on his back.

And so she voted him a darling, and rode him daily, and permitted him to carry her over ditches and hedges in a manner which delighted the hearts of the spectators; viz., the countless hangers-on of Mount Druid. Those were the sort of rides she took, — more schooling than riding. Every day Tinker, amidst enthusiastic applause, accomplished some feat greater than the day before; and Ethel, without vanity, might flatter herself that she was developing into a first-rate horsewoman.

Mr. O'Neil made no objection. He sometimes rode himself, but long, distant rides,

upon which Ethel evinced no inclination to accompany him.

"The roads are so stupid and dull, I should be bored to death," she had indeed candidly replied upon one occasion when he had proposed something of the sort. And her guardian had carelessly laughed, and had acknowledged that she was quite right, and that she probably would be bored to death, and had not made the faintest attempt to alter her determination.

Perhaps Ethel was a little surprised and piqued by his indifference; for a day or two afterwards she dropped in his presence a faint hint, that some day she would rather like to ride over to Castle Garvagh, and see how the place looked in this beautiful summer weather. But the observation was made to apparently insensible ears, and elicited no remarks.

Miss Mildmay pondered over this little incident with some angry perplexity; and, being a girl of spirit, it gave birth to one of the sudden resolves of which she was so fond. "Don't mind me. I will take Tinker out on the road for a little to-day," she informed the old coachman who generally accompanied her on foot to superintend the jumping, and who was, by Mr. O'Neil's orders, always within hail in case he should be required.

"But the master, miss" — objected the old man.

"Well, and what of the master?"

"He'll be mortal angry if he knows that I have let you outside of the demesne by yourself, miss. He has told me over and over again to be very careful."

"Has he?"

It was all the remark which the young lady vouchsafed. The next moment Tinker was cantering away in the direction of Castle Garvagh.

It was more than an hour's fast riding, and was, to say the least of it, considering the distance, and the desolate country, and the bourne in view, rather an adventurous undertaking for a solitary lady. But Ethel, as we know, liked adventurous undertakings. The road was new to her. She had never taken it before. But an inquiry or two to a gaping and amazed native remedied her ignorance; and, without the smallest incident worth recording, she in due time found herself before the great gate of Castle Garvagh.

This same gate had been the object of her ride, and she had never contemplated the boldness of penetrating beyond it. But now that she had reached it, and found it temptingly open, and saw the long straight

avenue lined on either side by rows of great, noble trees, she could not be herself, and not feel a strong, very strong desire to go a little farther. Tinker, too, seemed to be of the same way of thinking. The broad belts of soft turf at the foot of the trees, no doubt, looked inviting after the hard road to which he was so little accustomed. Grass was more to his liking than limestone. It required no urging upon his mistress's part to induce him to pass through the high-arched gateway, and to rest and cool his weary little feet upon the pleasant sward: up they went, — slowly at first, then more quickly. Ethel's heart was beating fast, faster than for a long, long while. This was Castle Garvagh! — that strange, mysterious Castle Garvagh of which she had heard and thought so much. She was within, actually within, the enchanted region over which hung the spell of so many conflicting hopes and interests. She could scarcely believe it. It seemed much more like a fantastic dream than the sober truth, that she, Ethel Mildmay, the story of whose life had become so closely mingled with the strange story of the O'Neils of Castle Garvagh, should now at last be gazing upon the old place, which, in its silent, solemn desolation, was such a startling contrast to the din of angry passions of which it was the object.

For it was strangely, solemnly desolate. Somehow Ethel felt her spirit sink, and a sort of painful awe creep over her, as she drew nearer and nearer to the great pile of gray buildings, which was the house, — not a castle, in spite of its name; for the castle had been burnt in '98, and its ruins only remained; and this was a square, graceless building, the vast size of which alone made it imposing.

She was right opposite to it now. All the long rows of tall, blank windows were staring at her fixedly. Not a soul was visible. Hardly a sound was audible. No smoke escaped from one of the many chimneys. The place looked absolutely uninhabited. It looked and felt under a curse, Ethel thought, with a shudder. The girl never forgot that first view of Castle Garvagh. The day, which two hours ago had been bright and unusually warm, had become now sultry and overcast. Leaden clouds were gathering slowly together. This morning the weather-wise had foretold that thunder was not far away; and now the air was heavy with thunder, and the peculiar hush which generally precedes it seemed to be hanging over the darkened earth. It seemed as though something were coming, and that nature was in expectancy; and even at that very moment

when Ethel paused right in front of those countless, gaping windows it came, — a loud, fearful peal, which seemed to break right over her head.

What happened after that? Ethel never distinctly knew. In a vague manner she knew that Tinker, whose reins she had been loosely and carelessly holding, gave a sudden plunge which almost threw her out of the saddle, and bolted over a steep narrow bridge, which spanned a sort of moat that seemed to surround the house. There was a moment's interval, during which she was trying with vain desperation to recover her seat, and to regain possession of the reins, which now were lost utterly; while Tinker was madly rushing, as it seemed to her, right into the great stone-fronted house before him. Then she knew nothing more. A sudden swerve had pitched her from her already insecure seat, and she had fallen head foremost against the doorsteps of Castle Garvagh.

When Ethel recovered consciousness some minutes later, her first act was one which did not argue particularly favorably for her sanity. She sat bolt upright in the bed upon which she had been laid, and said in a low, startled, yet perfectly distinct tone, the two words, "Count O'Neil!" Then, as suddenly, she lay back again, and closed her eyes.

But presently, after a minute or two, they opened slowly, and a little curiously again, while a faint color crept across her cold white checks. Count O'Neil! — where on earth had the words come from? She could have bitten the foolish lips that had formed them. What extraordinary train of ideas had shot through her dazed brain, and given shape and color to the first fixed one which had become imprinted upon it? She knew that she had said the words. The sound of them kept buzzing in her ears. But why had she said them? She could not make it out, — not now, not as yet, nor for a long time.

In her present surroundings there was not the slightest feature that she could discover to remind her of the young man.

She was lying on a big bed in an immense room; and a small spare woman, in a close cap and a dark stuff gown, was gently bathing her forehead with some cool, refreshing lotion. For a moment Ethel fancied herself to be dead, and lying in a coffin; for she could see that the sombre canopy of the bed was adorned with hearse-like, nodding plumes; and a sound, like that of an organ playing solemn, death-

like music, was stealing into her ears. But the delusion was a very brief one. One by one the mists cleared away from her brain, and for the second time she raised herself.

"What has happened? Where am I?" she inquired, sensibly enough this time.

"You are in Castle Garvagh. You were thrown from your horse, and hurt, but not severely, thank God!" the little woman by her side replied.

"Castle Garvagh! Is this Castle Garvagh?" And Ethel looked about her curiously and eagerly.

"Yes. You have often heard of it, I dare say;" and she smiled faintly.

"And that music — what is it?" Ethel asked breathlessly, as the sounds swelled into a sudden grand and harmonious burst.

"That is Lord O'Neil playing the organ. You have doubtless heard that he is a good musician."

There was yet another question. "And you," Ethel began hesitatingly, and turning round so as to face the little woman, — "you are" —

There was a slight pause before she replied. Then she said, "I am Mrs. Irwin, Madame la Comtesse O'Neil's sister, and Count O'Neil's — aunt."

"Ah! I am Miss Mildmay." And Ethel heaved a little sigh, and, lying back, closed her eyes once more.

Not from weakness or exhaustion this time, however: as Mrs. Irwin had said, she was not severely hurt, and, but for a sharp pain where her forehead had been cut in the fall, she felt quite well. But she had so much to think of, — so much to try to understand and to realize. Mrs. Irwin's voice had awakened so many sleeping impressions, had recalled so many dormant memories. It was so curiously like her sister's voice, and like Count O'Neil's too. It seemed to be the one point of similarity between the two sisters. In appearance there was none. What greater contrast could there be than between Madame O'Neil's handsome, striking features, and tall commanding figure, and this small, insignificant woman by her side, whose face would have been irredeemably ordinary but for the painful look of intense self-control and patient endurance which was its principal expression? Ethel watched it furtively under her eyelids for a minute or two, but soon perceived that Mrs. Irwin was as closely and curiously studying her.

"How do you feel now, Miss Mildmay?" she inquired abruptly, when their eyes met in that mutual, searching survey, and

speaking in those smooth, soft tones, and with the marked foreign accent, which more than twenty years' residence in Ireland had not made her lose.

"I feel better, — quite well, I believe, except my forehead. Is it cut?" Ethel inquired anxiously, and with an alarmed glance in the direction of a massive looking-glass of the date of the year one, which stood upon a vast and equally ancient toilet-table.

Mrs. Irwin smiled. "Yes, it is cut a little; but your hair hides it nearly. I will fetch you a little mirror, that you may see and be re-assured."

And, before Ethel could detain her, she had glided from the room, presently returning with a small hand-glass.

"See! it is nothing," she said. "You are as pretty as ever."

Perhaps Ethel resented the familiarity of the words and the smile which accompanied them; for she rose from the bed rather suddenly.

"Thank you! I am giving you a great deal of trouble; and I am quite well, I believe, only a little weak." And she turned pale and staggered; for, now that she was on her feet, she felt shaken, and hardly able to stand.

Mrs. Irwin gently forced her into an arm-chair. "No, not quite well yet," she said; "though you will be in an hour or two when the carriage comes to fetch you. I have sent over to Mount Druid to inform them of the accident," she explained.

"Oh! but why did you do that? I could have ridden home. I would much rather ride," she insisted.

"But you would not be able. No: I assure you that you would not. You are weaker than you think. Besides, your pony has hurt himself, and could not carry you."

This was decisive. Ethel heard with dismay that poor Tinker had fared less happily than herself, and that his escapade was punished by a severe injury.

"Mrs. O'Neil will probably herself come to fetch you," Mrs. Irwin observed, after she had forced Ethel to drink some wine, and that she saw that she was looking herself again. "She, her son rather, ought not to allow you to take such long rides alone."

"They did not know I was coming," Ethel replied shortly.

"Ah!" And Mrs. Irwin gave her a searching look. "You were, I suppose, curious to see the place," she went on after a pause. "Do you know, Miss Mildmay, that I have been looking out for you this

long time, wondering why you did not come before?" And she smiled.

Ethel colored. "Why did you expect me to come?" she inquired.

"Oh! because"—Then, suddenly and quite quietly, but clasping her hands together closely, "Miss Mildmay, tell me something about my nephew, Count O'Neil," she said.

"What can I tell you? I have not seen him this long time,—not for more than three months, since I left Nice."

"Nor heard from him?"

"He has written; but I returned the letters."

Ethel expected an angry observation; but none came. Mrs. Irwin did not seem to have heard her. "You have not seen him for three months; but I have not seen him for nearly two years," she said in the same quiet, self-contained voice. "Tell me about him."

"I have nothing to tell."

"Is he handsome?"

"Yes."

"And charming?"

"Yes."

"And good?"

"I believe—Yes: I am sure he is good."

"And clever?"

"Yes: he is clever."

"And you love him very dearly?"

It was said in precisely the same tone, as though she were merely mentioning a well-ascertained fact; but the sunken, dark gray eyes seemed to light up suddenly.

As to Ethel's eyes, they flashed. "No! I do not love him at all," she said.

Mrs. Irwin looked amazed. "How is that?" she asked quickly.

Ethel stood up. "I don't know how it is," she said passionately. "I can't tell you. I did love him: at least, I thought I did. But since that dreadful thing happened; since"—and her voice fell,—"since, through loving him, I killed papa, I tell you, Mrs. Irwin, that I love him no more."

"And yet just now—just now—you called his name."

Ethel crimsoned. There was a pause. The storm had not yet quite spent itself; and at that very moment a vivid flash of lightning, which made both the women start, and involuntarily clasp each other's hand, lit up the room. The organ was pealing away louder than ever.

"I called his name," Ethel said presently; "but it meant nothing. I was not in my right senses, and something must have suddenly reminded me of him. Mrs. Ir-

win, if you are a woman, and have a woman's heart!"

"I have, though few believe it: you need not fear, Miss Mildmay."

"There is nothing for me to fear," Ethel said coldly and haughtily.

Mrs. Irwin was silent. She was looking at the young girl, and seemed absorbed in thought. "At least, you did love him, and he loved you. You love him still,—you must, if you ever loved him, that is." She said at last, "May I embrace you?"

Ethel drew back. For the life of her she could not have helped the involuntary movement; though she bitterly regretted it the next instant.

Mrs. Irwin saw it. "I know that it is a liberty that I am asking," she said very gently, almost indeed humbly; "for I am but a servant. But at least I am his aunt,—his mother's sister."

What could Ethel do? What she did do was, without another word, to bend her proud neck, and to raise her pretty, blushing face. And Mrs. Irwin gave her a silent, passionate kiss.



CHAPTER XXIII.

BUT the marvels of that day were not nearly exhausted yet. Greater ones were still to come. Before the two women had had time to recover from the sort of little shock which that kiss had produced, a knock came to the door, and a broad-shouldered girl, with naked feet, and a basket of turf not ungracefully poised upon her head, appeared. What she said was said in Irish, which, of course, Ethel could not understand. But Mrs. Irwin translated it for her, looking, truth to tell, a little disconcerted and surprised.

His lordship wished to know how the young lady felt herself, and whether she would not come down and take a glass of wine with him in the dining-room.

Ethel gave Mrs. Irwin a questioning glance.

"I did not suppose that he was aware that you were here," Mrs. Irwin answered. "Some days, the thought of there being a stranger in the house sets him wild. He is very capricious."

"But ought I to go to him? Is he very?" — Ethel asked timorously.

"Odd, you mean to say, or, rather, mad. Sometimes he is,—generally, indeed. But there are times when he is quite sane and sensible. To-day, for instance, you will

probably find him reasonable and rational."

"But"— And Ethel hesitated still.

"It will irritate him if you do not go to him," Mrs. Irwin said. "He will fancy all sorts of things. The old man has strange fancies, without beginning or end." And she spoke with subdued irritation. "If you fear— If it pleases you, I will accompany you," she volunteered.

"I am not afraid. But— I think I would rather you would be there,— just at first, you know," the girl confessed.

They left the room together; the bare-footed girl, still balanceing her turf-basket, holding the door open for them to pass, and gaping with all her great Irish blue eyes at the slender, fair-haired apparition in the neat dark riding-habit. Miss Mildmay returned the glance with usury; perceiving which Mrs. Irwin said, "You are surprised to see such a servant in a great house like this: but his lordship is poor; at least, he says he is."

"Indeed! I fancied that all his relations thought him rich."

Mrs. Irwin took no notice of the retort, but led the way in silence down a handsome, double-winged oaken staircase, which led into a vast entrance-hall. Here was the organ,— a fine, noble instrument. But it was silent now. The musician had departed.

"What trouble you must have had carrying me up stairs!" Ethel remarked wonderingly. "I knew nothing of it."

"No: you had fainted, and were quite unconscious. We carried you up the back staircase,— my husband and I. Not this one."

"And why the back staircase?"

"Because one never can be certain of his lordship's moods. Besides, it would have alarmed him to have seen you."

There was no time for any thing more. They had crossed the hall, and were standing before a door at which Mrs. Irwin tapped gently. Ethel heard no answer, but probably one had been given; for Mrs. Irwin turned the handle, and opened it. "There is his lordship. Go in," she said. And she gave the young girl a push.

There was his lordship! Ethel was not a nervous girl, nor a timid one. But a mist came before her eyes just then, and a queer, very unpleasant sensation into her throat. There was Lord O'Neil,— a mile away from her still, as it seemed to her in that first embarrassing moment,— sitting at the far end of the room, at the top of a long, long, shining mahogany table, and right underneath a picture, which, even at the

first glance, and at such a distance, she at once recognized to be his own portrait.

His own portrait. But could it be? Could that handsome, dark-eyed, smiling face, and that erect, proud figure, be the face and figure of the dreary wretch before her?

Lord O'Neil had risen on her entrance, with an old-fashioned, ceremonious inclination, and was standing still, waiting for her to come nearer. Upon all those leagues of brightly polished tables, there were but three tiny objects,— two wine-glasses and a decanter. Ethel kept them steadily in view as she walked, somehow or other, she never knew exactly how, up the whole length of the interminable room, and reached them and Lord O'Neil. The next moment she found herself seated upon a peculiarly hard, horse-hair chair, with a high, straight back, to which the old man pointed as he resumed his seat himself.

All Ethel's nervousness had melted into curiosity now; a sentiment which seemed to be thoroughly reciprocated by Lord O'Neil, whose dark, lustreless eyes were scanning her from head to foot from beneath a pair of white shaggy brows. Truly he was a strange-looking old man, tall and gaunt and spare, and perfectly colorless, in a worn threadbare coat, the sight of which made Ethel shiver even upon that warm day; a wreck, nothing but a wreck, of what had once been a handsome, ardent, living man, but was now little more than a galvanized corpse; a pale, spectral image of a life that has lived its day, and yet can not, or perhaps will not, die.

Quite suddenly, but gently, he broke the silence in which he and his visitor had been openly taking one another in.

"What is your name, young lady?" he inquired, pouring out with a tremulous hand, that could scarcely grasp the decanter, a glass of dark brown wine, and pushing it over to her.

"My name is Ethel— Ethel Mildmay. Thank you, Lord O'Neil; but I have already had some wine up stairs."

"Have you? Who gave it to you? Mrs. Irwin, there?" And he glared towards the end of the room, where, near the door, Mrs. Irwin was meekly standing. Perceiving the angry, suspicious glance, Ethel was afraid to say yes, and was silent. But the old man's displeasure was but momentary, if displeasure it was at all. "Ethel Mildmay," he repeated; "Ethel Mildmay,— a pretty name. My nephew Arthur's ward; eh?"

"Yes, I am Mr. O'Neil's ward."

"Indeed! Arthur is a handsome fellow.

He ought to marry you : he means to, I suppose?" and he gave a low chuckling laugh.

Ethel flamed into a rosy blush. "He does not,—he does not mean any thing of the sort,—neither do I," she protested angrily.

"He does not? more fool he! Well, now, what brought you over to Castle Garvagh, young lady, and all by yourself too? You came by yourself; did you not?"

"Yes. It was foolish of me; but I was curious to see the place, and"—

"And what besides the place? Come, now, tell the truth."

"I am not in the habit of telling any thing but the truth. I believe that I was curious to see you too, Lord O'Neil; but I would never have come in, never have intruded upon you, but that that horrid Tinker"—

"Curious to see me, were you? upon my word I am greatly flattered," interrupted Lord O'Neil, giving the girl a keen, searching, surprised glance. "By Heaven, you're candid, young lady, at all events. And who sent you?—Master Arthur, eh?"

"No! of course not. Why should he have sent me?"

"Because he is too proud to come near me himself. Ah, there's a true O'Neil for you,—as proud as Lucifer! Arthur would sooner go to hell than watch and worrit me the way those Irwins do for that scamp of a nephew of theirs—for he is their nephew, isn't he?" he asked suddenly, bending forward so that Ethel felt his hot breath upon her cheek, and speaking in a low, startled whisper.

The girl was frightened. "I don't know—how should I know? I know nothing," she said.

"You don't know; don't you?" and the old man burst into a harsh laugh. "And so you're not wiser than your neighbors, young lady? We're all in the same box, then. *She* knows," he went on, with a nod of his white head towards Mrs. Irwin, who stood immovable in the same spot and attitude at the farther end of the room. "*She* knows well enough; but she is a clever woman, and can hold her tongue. She's worth twenty of that devil of a sister of hers, I can tell you." Then he laughed again,—a laugh that made Ethel shudder, it was so hollow and mirthless. "And perhaps I'll outlive them all yet," he went on with a wicked chuckle,—"Master Arthur, and that young fellow, and the countess (as she calls herself), and Mary Anne Irwin, over there, and that villain of a husband of hers. Who knows! As long as there is breath in a man's body, there's hope; and

I'm not going to die yet, not a bit of it!—no, nor for many a long day, though they'd all give their immortal souls to throw the first shovelful of earth upon me." And he glared at Ethel in the most alarming way.

But the girl was more disgusted than alarmed. "You are greatly to be pitied, Lord O'Neil," she said with a shade of contemptuous compassion in her voice.

"To be pitied,—what for? *They're* to be pitied who see the years go by, and their youth pass away in vain desires and longings. What am I to be pitied for, young lady? I have lived my life, and have nothing left to hope for but to disappoint *them*. And that I am doing, am I not, every minute, every hour? Every day that I live is a gain to me and a loss to them. And I have many a day yet to live, you may tell Master Arthur who sent you here, young lady. Tell him, with my love, that I am strong and hale, and hard to kill,—hard to kill. Wishes don't kill, or I'd be dead long ago. But the O'Neils are tough and long-lived, thank God!"

Ethel stood up. "Mr. O'Neil did not send me here," she said indignantly, "and it is a great shame for you to pretend to think he did. You *know* he did not, Lord O'Neil," she said firmly, her eyes flashing with a fire that was worthy of the pride of the O'Neils themselves.

"How should I know it? Don't I know that they are all watching me, and counting every breath I breathe? So Master Arthur did not send you, young lady, did he not? Then why did you come?"

"I did not mean to come: it was an accident, I"—

But the old man interrupted her, laughing at her rage. "Perhaps you came on your own account, then,—to see and judge for yourself; perhaps you're scheming as well as the rest of them, for all your fair face and innocent looks. But which will you try your fortune with, young lady,—the uncle, or the nephew? Ha, ha! there's the puzzle. I'd say the uncle if I were you," raising his voice for Mrs. Irwin's benefit, and giving her a malicious glance. "He's an O'Neil, at all events; while the other—God knows who he is! Mary Anne Irwin, over there, knows it well; but she'll not tell, not if her tongue were to be dragged out of her head with red-hot pincers. Catch the uncle, young lady: that's my advice. By Heaven, what ducks and drakes ye'll all be making of the old place when I am gone!"

Ethel was standing before him now, pale with indignation. But the mischievous, satirical gleam, which she suddenly detected in the old man's eyes, checked the angry words

upon her lips. He wanted to "rile" her, and she would not be riled: she would have the advantage of him yet. "The old place!" she repeated with cool contempt. "It is a poor old place, not worth the fuss you seem to think that all the world is making about it."

If she had coolly informed her host that the house was on fire, and the next instant would crumble down on top of him, he could not have looked more horrified and amazed. With a great bound he was on his feet, towering above her with all his great slender height, and glaring upon her like the lunatic he was. But Ethel was a brave girl, and never faltered, never removed her own steady eyes from his.

"Ugly!" he cried; "Castle Garvagh poor and ugly! Are you mad, child? are you mad?" And, sweeping down upon her, he suddenly whirled her to the nearest window, and drew back from it the faded crimson curtain. "Look!" he exclaimed with tremulous vehemence,—"look, and say now whether Castle Garvagh is poor and ugly; whether, in the length and breadth of the three kingdoms, there is a more beautiful spot than this?"

Ethel looked and was silent; for she could not gainsay him: she could not in common honesty and reason maintain the truth of her contemptuous and slighting verdict. Yes, it was true: it was a lovely spot; and the little she had as yet seen of Castle Garvagh was but a poor preparation for the beauty which now, with the suddenness of a vision, had burst upon her. A green, sloping lawn, studded with ancient and splendid trees; a vast dark-blue lake, with many dewy islets, green as emeralds, floating upon its bosom; beyond, crowning an eminence, the picturesque ruins of a great and noble pile,—what once had been the magnificent Castle Garvagh, and which now stood out in gaunt relief against what seemed to be miles and miles of rich green forest. It was very beautiful, serene, and lovely in the burst of brilliant sunshine, which, now that the thunderstorm had spent itself, was pouring down upon it through great jagged rents in the clouds; and Ethel, gazing upon it, suddenly remembered and understood the enthusiasm with which Arthur O'Neil had once spoken to her of Castle Garvagh.

"It is pretty," she confessed candidly after a pause.

Lord O'Neil laughed, and relaxed the tight grip with which he had been holding her slender wrist. Her words were but poor praise; but the involuntary heartiness with which they were said testified to their sincerity, and gratified him.

Indeed, it was soon by no means difficult to perceive, that, ominously as their acquaintance had begun, the eccentric old man had taken a fancy to his uninvited visitor, and, after his fashion, that he meant to make himself agreeable to her.

For two long hours and more, the girl had to bear him company, and to do penance for her escapade. After all, when she grew accustomed to him, and overcame her first nervousness, it was not such a long, severe penance. Lord O'Neil, as Mrs. Irwin had told her, was mad, if mad at all, only by fits and starts. His manias were avarice, suspicion, and distrust. Whenever, for a time, his mind could free itself from these three spectres, which, in the wretched isolated existence he led, grew daily stronger and stronger, threatening soon to master him completely, he was a tolerably kindly, harmless old man, to whom the ancient courtly traditions of his youth still clung, in spite of the savage solitude to which he had for so long condemned himself.

Of course, Lord O'Neil had a story, or rather many stories. His youth and manhood had been stormy and wild: he had brought sorrow and disgrace upon many, and, in his turn, had been made sorrowful and disgraced. A young and beautiful wife whom he, already old, had, in a frenzy of love, married, betrayed and dishonored him. Long, long ago it had all happened: even memories of these things were faded and indistinct, washed out by Time's kindly touch. His wife and her child had been laid to rest in a foreign churchyard, before that luckless day on which Arthur O'Neil's mother had first laid her eyes upon those two French girls who had wrought so much mischief to her sons; but it was said and believed, that that false wife's crime had put the finishing stroke to Lord O'Neil's manhood, and certain it is that ever since it he had been the miserable, useless creature we find him now.

It was long since a fair young girl, like Ethel Mildmay, had brought sunshine and brightness amongst the deep, silent shadows of the old place. Lord O'Neil, unpropitious and disagreeable as he had chosen at first to make himself, would not let her out of his sight now. In vain she tried to make her escape. Together they went through acres of gaunt, empty stables, where, in the good old times of Lord O'Neil's father, and his own spendthrift youth, teams upon teams of horses, the marvel and admiration of all the country, had been kept. Now they were silent, weed-grown, and deserted, dilapidated, and going fast to ruin; poor little Tinker with his badly cut knees, and a couple of sorry-looking laboring beasts,

their sole denizens. The place was a picture of desolation: not a shilling would Lord O'Neil allow to be spent upon it; and rumor said, that his trusty steward, Denis Irwin, was as close and avaricious as himself, and that the secret of the mastery he possessed over him lay in their mutual sordid sympathies.

A pleasanter spectacle than the stables and offices, all equally melancholy in their neglect and decay, were the grounds around them, the beauty of which no neglect could destroy. Lord O'Neil brought her down to the white sandy beach of the blue lake, which was not a lake at all, but an arm of the sea, but, like one of the Norway fiords, wooded to its very edge, and so sheltered and calm and peaceful, that it was hard to believe that its bright limpid waters were really those of the great Atlantic. Then they went through shady paths, amid tangles of wild flowers of every form and hue, all the earth smelling sweetly after the storm, up to the picturesque old churchyard, which the peasantry firmly believed was haunted, and for which they preserved such a devout veneration, that, though burials were no longer allowed within it, they still stealthily brought their dead by night to lay them in the sacred earth. It was all very green and wild and beautiful. Daisies were thickly strewn over the crowded graves, and moss and lichen and ivy crept over the ancient tombstones, and clambered up the tottering walls, and through the broken arched windows of the old abbey. Ethel was charmed, yet saddened too. It was a sad place; and now and then, when the girl glanced furtively at the gaunt, tall figure, and white shaggy head, of her strange companion, her heart failed her, and a weird sensation stole over her, as though she had strayed into some uncanny region, of which ghosts and spirits were more likely inhabitants than mortal men and women.

Yet she actually saw neither ghost nor spirit, though more than once she was half-tempted to fancy that she did. More than once Mrs. Irwin's quiet steps forever dogging them, and her watchful eyes forever observing them, startled and frightened her. The woman seemed resolved never to let them out of her sight for more than five minutes at a time.

Now it would be from behind a tombstone, now from round a corner, now with apparent unconcern walking down a cross-path, that she would appear. What did it mean? — was it that her master could not be trusted? or that she was jealous of the favor which the young visitor had found? or that she wished to secure some more

conversation with her herself? Ethel was irritated and fairly perplexed by the ceaseless observation to which she was subjected, but did not dare remonstrate against it. Lord O'Neil either did not perceive it, or was too well accustomed to it to notice it.

And so two hours and more passed, not so thoroughly unpleasantly, after all. There was an element of adventure in the situation, which tickled Ethel's fancy, and kept up her spirits; yet when at long, long last, the welcome sound of carriage-wheels was heard approaching, she heaved a little sigh of relief, and began to breathe more freely. "They are coming!" she exclaimed joyfully: "they are coming to fetch me!"

Lord O'Neil gave her a sardonic glance: perhaps he was affronted by her very visible gladness at the prospect of a speedy release.

"Are they? Time for them," he remarked ungraciously. "So Master Arthur, having sent you into the lion's mouth, will actually descend to come to fetch you out of it; will he? Very kind of him, indeed!"

Ethel thought it beneath her to resent the oft-repeated sneer. "I suppose Mr. O'Neil is coming," was all the reply to it which she vouchsafed.

But she was mistaken. The Mount Druid carriage contained Mrs. O'Neil, her fair face flushed and anxious, but nobody else. The fat old horses were blown and streaming; old John's eyes were starting out of their sockets; poor little Mrs. O'Neil was all ruffled and fluttered, and nearly screamed with joy when she found Ethel upon the door-steps, whole and smiling, waiting to receive her.

"We thought you were killed, child: we thought you were killed!" she cried.

"Did you? Oh, I am so sorry, Mrs. O'Neil!"

"At least, I did. Arthur said that it was all nonsense, and that I was a fool to be so frightened. Good-evening, Cousin O'Neil!"

It was quite a little comedy to watch the meeting between the pair: they had never liked one another, and, of late years, charity had not increased. On principle, Mrs. O'Neil still, from time to time, paid formal visits to Castle Garvagh; but these visits only served to keep up the semblance of friendship, and not seldom ended in an open quarrel; for Mrs. O'Neil, as we know, was an outspoken lady, but little versed in the art of holding her tongue, and would, on occasions, impart her mind as roundly to Lord O'Neil as to anybody else.

To-day the old gentleman could not re-

sist a snarl in the very first breath. "And so you've come all alone in search of the stray lamb, Cousin Sarah?" he observed. "What's that lazy fellow of an Arthur doing, that he'll never take the trouble of looking after a poor, helpless old man,—when there is a young lady in question too? Upon my honor, I did not think he had grown into quite such a boor as that!" and he gave one of his malicious chuckles.

Mrs. O'Neil fired up like tinder. "Arthur is neither a boor nor a lazy fellow," she said warmly. "He would be glad to call over to see you now and then if"—

And here she paused, a withering glance at Mrs. Irwin, who at that moment appeared in the background, completing the sentence.

"Ah! it is to Mary Anne Irwin you object."

And the old man smiled wickedly. "But what can we do, Cousin Sarah? She'll be throning it in Castle Garvagh one day yet, aunt to the heir, you know,—aunt to the heir!"

Poor, wretched old man! This was his one pleasure, his one idea of enjoyment,—to play off one rival against the other, and to torment the lives of all who came near him. To him the future was a blank: he neither knew nor apparently cared what solution it would bring to the great Castle Garvagh mystery. "After him the deluge." But the present was his own at least; and to it he clung with the frantic grip of a drowning man.

Little Mrs. O'Neil actually cried with rage and mortification when she and Ethel were at last alone in the carriage.

"The wicked old creature! the nasty, wicked old creature!" she exclaimed. "As if he did not know, as if he *must* not know, that my son, and my son only, will ever be master at Castle Garvagh. O Lord, Lord! where, how, is it all to end?"

Where? how? who could tell? who could even guess? Ethel took the old lady's hands in hers, and softly stroked them; and, doing so, she looked out, with perplexed, clouded eyes, upon the brown, bleak bog through which their road was wending, and thought, with a strange pang at her heart, of that fervid, peculiar kiss of Mrs. Irwin's, which seemed to be burning her forehead still.



CHAPTER XXIV.

ABOUT a week after this, Ethel and her guardian had an explanation. It happened thus. The day subsequent to

the Castle Garvagh adventure, Mr. O'Neil had gone away, as he was from time to time in the habit of doing, on a short visit to Dublin. But his absence was a brief one, and within the week he had already returned.

It was a bright, warm July day. The pleasure-ground of Mount Druid was in all the glow of summer beauty, and nestled cosily, like a tiny, gorgeous, fairy-garden, amidst the greenery with which it was encircled. It was a pretty, gay pleasure-ground; but its beauty only consisted in itself, and borrowed nothing from its surroundings. It could boast of no view, no glimpses, no suggestiveness of any sort. Hemmed closely in on every side by a thick wall of verdure, it was like a jewel sparkling in its velvet case, in itself exquisite and complete, yet lacking the rare fanciful setting, which would have increased the pleasure of those who looked at it.

Ethel, for her part, felt a little weary of its monotonous beauty this afternoon. Since Tinker's disaster, the girl had been dull, and had learned to marvel at the apathy with which she had borne the dulness of former days. Her rides were a terrible loss to her; and already her pallid looks were returning, and her figure was beginning to droop again. And only to-day, alas! had she been informed that Tinker would be disabled for at least a week to come, and that to ride him in the present state of his wounded knees would be an inhuman impossibility.

And so Miss Mildmay felt cross and dull, and much at a loss what to do with herself this hot, bright afternoon. Mrs. O'Neil had pressed upon her the mild diversion of a drive. But Ethel was sick of those slow progresses along those dreary roads, and had begged to be let off to-day, even though a special attraction had been held out to her in the shape of a visit to Redfern Park, a place about six miles away, in which their nearest, and, indeed, almost solitary neighbors resided. Mrs. O'Neil had thereupon been compelled to fall back upon the faithful Flaherty for a companion, and had sallied forth, gorgeous in her best black silk gown and Paris bonnet, and in a carriage from which every breath of air was, even upon this warm day, carefully excluded, upon her errand. And Ethel was left with her long afternoon to do with as she chose.

No doubt about it, she felt it a little long,—at least, she thought that she was going to feel it excessively long. Her guardian was away, and they had no reason to suppose that he was going to return that day,

Ethel's single companion was Max; and Max had not been in favor lately,—had, indeed, been treated with a marked coldness ever since that evening when he had displayed such a marked preference for obeying his master's commands rather than her own. Yet Ethel was fond of Max; and Max was fond of Ethel,—very fond, indeed, it would seem. For to-day, though the girl passed him by without a glance or a caress, and took not the slightest pity upon his consciously penitent looks and shy advances towards a reconciliation, Max would persistently follow her; and when she found a shady spot, and stretched herself, as she was fond of doing, upon the lowly grass, he seated himself beside her with an air of determination, and proceeded to lick her little white hand, which lay listlessly upon her black dress, with a very red and affectionate tongue.

Ethel could not but be mollified. But he was not absolved yet. "You bad dog!" she addressed him severely. "You wicked, bad dog! You don't care for me,—not one bit: you know you don't. And you are a hypocrite and a sneak. When your master is away, you toady me; but, the instant he comes back, you'll change sides in a twinkling, and refuse even to look at me, unless, indeed, he gives you leave. Get away! I don't like you, Max;" and she made a feint of pushing the dog from her. But it was a mild feint,—so mild, that Max held his ground, and wagged his tail, and looked supremely delighted.

"I did not know that you were capable of keeping such long accounts as that, Miss Mildmay," a voice remarked just behind her.

Ethel jumped up. She had fancied herself alone; yet here was Mr. O'Neil within a few yards, and smiling at her through some trailing greenery which had concealed him from her.

"Mr. O'Neil! I did not know you had come back. When did you come back?"

"Barely an hour ago. I came by the night mail, but was detained for the morning at —, and so have only just arrived."

"Oh! I did not see you, of course, or"—

"Or what? Pray complete the sentence."

"Oh, nothing! I would not have disturbed you. You were reading."

"Yes. And you also seem about to read," glancing at the volume in her hand.

"Yes."

"Pray, don't let me interfere with you." And the branches were dropped, and Mr. O'Neil again screened in; and Ethel, as it

was evidently expected of her to do, resumed her seat upon the grass, and opened her book.

Certainly the greeting between guardian and ward was by no means a demonstrative one. The separation had been, it is true, a short one. Yet, short as it had been, the common rules of politeness might, it would have seemed, have demanded a little more effusion.

Max, faithful to his "new love" for the present, was by Ethel's side again. But the girl, with considerably more vigor this time, pushed him away from her, and, when he seemed but little disposed to move, stood up again, and looked about for another seat. "I don't want your company, Max," she informed him roundly; "and so don't bother me."

Up went the greenery again. "What a terribly long memory you have, Miss Mildmay!" Mr. O'Neil observed. "Poor Max! Have you not forgiven him yet?"

"No! That is: there is nothing particular for me to forgive. Only he bores me."

"Does he? I fancied you were a little fond of the dog."

"I used to be; but"—

"Would you like me to give him to you?"

"To give him to me! O Mr. O'Neil!"

"I would rather not. But still, for the sake of peace, I will if you like. It is evident that you are of a jealous, tyrannical disposition, Miss Mildmay, to which it must be all or nothing. You won't go halves on any account. I see nothing for it but for me to give you the dog."

Ethel bridled up. "Pray, don't think of such a thing. I would not accept such a favor on any account," she replied with dignity.

"Would you not? From me, that is. The present of a dog is not such a mighty favor, after all. But I will not pretend to regret your refusal. Max is a faithful old fellow, and I would be sorry to resign possession of him. Still I do wish you would be good-natured to him," he added with a little laugh.

"How absurd!"

"Why is it absurd? You can't deny that you are affronted and displeased with him; for I heard you tell him so five minutes ago. I heard you tell the old fellow that he was a toady and a"—

"I don't want to have any thing to say to the dog. He only cares to be with me when he can't get at you. Just now, when he was wagging his tail, and looking so supremely 'delighted,' it was because he

knew that you were behind that evergreen, though I did not. I don't want to have anything to say to the dog."

And having delivered this excessively childish and silly confession in sharp, rapid tones, and with suddenly flushed cheeks, Miss Mildmay walked a few steps away, seated herself, and opened her book.

Mr. O'Neil, however, had closed his : nor did he seem to have the slightest intention of allowing her to read hers; for he emerged from his green hiding-place, and came and sat down near her.

"There is no object," he observed, "in screaming at one another, and fatiguing our lungs, when there is no particular reason for our remaining four or five yards apart."

"I thought we were going to read."

"So I was right. You *are* jealous and tyrannical," Mr. O'Neil remarked thoughtfully, without taking the slightest notice of this very broad hint.

"I dare say I am. What other charming qualities will you give me, Mr. O'Neil ?"

"Let me see. I can't think of any just at present. Come, Miss Mildmay, relent. I really do want you to forgive poor old Max."

"How tiresome you are ! As if it mattered a straw."

"But it does, — several straws. I'll tell you why. If — when I go away, I shall want you to take care of him for me, to be, in fact, his mistress" —

"Go away ? Are you going away, Mr. O'Neil ?"

He looked at her. There was something in the tone of her voice, — a faint, startled ring. But her face expressed nothing but astonishment.

"Not quite immediately. Perhaps not, indeed, for a couple of months ; but then it is probable I shall go, and be away for some time "

"How long ? A month" —

"Nearer six ; perhaps even more, Heaven only knows."

Ethel was silent, looking down. Presently a smile, but a stormy smile, played upon her lips. "I have tired you out already, Mr. O'Neil," she said: "you are weary of your rôle of guardian."

He reddened. "Am I ?" he asked quietly.

"I think you are ; I am sure you are : and I am turning you out of your own home. It is too bad ! It can't be !" and Ethel spoke vehemently, and in a tone of real distress.

There was a little pause. Then Mr.

O'Neil said very constrainedly and coldly, "You are quite mistaken. Why should you suppose that you are turning me out of my own home, Miss Mildmay ?"

"Because you do not like me ; and yet — yet you can't get rid of me."

Was she speaking in all simplicity and earnestness ? or was she merely acting the part of the inveterate coquette she was ? Apparently Mr. O'Neil was at a loss to know ; for he gave her a quick, searching glance.

"Why should you take it for granted that I do not like you, Miss Mildmay," he inquired at last.

"Why ? How can you like me ?" she replied candidly.

"Why ? How, indeed ? Mr. O'Neil colored and bit his lips. True enough. His ward had certainly, of her own free will, never given him very many reasons, such as a sane, sensible man might accept, to like her. He thought of the past. Ever since he had known her, she had been wayward, saucy, often even downright impudent to him. He thought of the present ; and in the present, Ethel was cold, indifferent, repellent, yielding an enforced, unwilling submission to the guardianship which had been thrust upon him, and which he had been as loath to accept as she to submit to. The girl was right. True enough, if he did like her, he was a fool for his pains. But, as we know,

*"La raison sans cesse raisonne,
Et n'a jamais guéri personne."*

"I don't know the 'why' or the 'how,'" he replied suddenly and sharply. "It is a matter of no importance one way or the other. I am your guardian, and you are my ward ; and I suppose that we are both mutually inclined to do our duty by one another."

Ethel looked at him in amazement. She had never in her life heard him speak so dryly, harshly even, before.

"Your duties do not seem to be particularly onerous ones," she said with a short, angry laugh.

"That is what I was coming to. They are not onerous ; and therefore it is that I have made up my mind that I can, without in any way going against your dear father's wishes, leave you in charge of my mother during my absence."

"Of course," and Ethel's foot was beating a double-quick march upon the innocent green grass and the poor little daisies.

"It is important business that will oblige me to go, — very important business. I

shall have to go to America, and probably be compelled to remain there several months. I — Miss Mildmay” —

“Yes.”

She looked at him. His face was quite altered; so was his voice. All impatience and irritation had passed out of both, and now he only looked unusually pale and grave.

“Forgive me!” he said. “I believe that I spoke sharply just now; but I did not mean it. The fact is,” he went on with a half-smile, “that it gives me great pain, that it grieves me excessively, to be obliged to leave home for so long, to leave my mother and” —

Ethel waited for the word; but it did not come. “Does Mrs. O’Neil know about it?” she inquired at last.

“No, oh, no! And I do not wish her to know as yet. I may not have to leave for many weeks, perhaps even not at all. It is uncertain, and in all cases there is no use in worrying her before the time. I only told you because — ah, yes! I remember, for poor Max’s sake. You will let me leave him in your charge, will you not?”

“Of course, Mr. O’Neil.”

“And you will be good to him.”

“Am I likely to be any thing else? But he will miss you.”

“For a while; but he will soon forget to miss me. A dog’s memory is, after all, I suppose, not longer than a man’s.” And he laughed, and sighed too, then, a little bitterly.

There was a silence after this, — a silence which was, however, filled with the countless sounds of nature, — the buzzing of insects, the droning of bees, the rustling of leaves, the singing of birds.

*“On entendait dans les ramures
Ces sons qui semblent des murmures,
Ces bruits qui semblent des baisers.”*

Abruptly Mr. O’Neil broke this melodious but perhaps painful silence. “What were you going to do with yourself this afternoon?” he inquired quietly and in his usual tone of voice again.

“To read, I believe. There was nothing particular to do,” Ethel replied a little despondently.

“But that is dull work. Why would you not drive?”

“I hate driving!”

“Poor child! You are bored to death, no doubt about it. I wish we had some amusement.”

“No, I am not,” rather indignantly interrupted. “You know very well that I don’t want — that I could not like amusement.

Tinker will be well in a few days. And then” —

“Tinker well in a few days! Perhaps so. But you will never mount that brute again.”

“Of course I shall.”

“Not with my consent. He has proved himself a treacherous little brute; and I would not trust you on his back. One escape does not guarantee another. You might be killed next time.”

“I might have been killed last time, so far as some people would have cared about it,” Ethel said angrily. But she was ashamed of her little outburst the next instant, and tried to cover it over. “Nonsense, Mr. O’Neil! Tinker is quite safe, I assure you.”

“I beg to assure you of the contrary, Miss Mildmay. What do you mean by that speech?” he inquired, turning round upon her suddenly.

“What speech?”

“You know very well.”

Another storm seemed imminent, indeed, was ready to burst. But Ethel, as we know, for all her boldness, was something of a coward at heart, and, as soon as she had evoked a hurricane, was generally anxious to hide from it as cleverly as she could.

She started to her feet suddenly now. “How tiresome you are!” she exclaimed petulantly, “catching one up this way. I did not mean any thing particular. I am sure I don’t care whether you cared or not,” she added lucidly. Suddenly Mr. O’Neil smiled, — one of his brightest, most genial smiles.

“I know that I behaved badly; that I ought to have gone to fetch you the other day at Castle Garvagh; that I ought, indeed, to have ridden over with you there myself,” he said frankly. “My mother gave me a severe lecture on the subject” —

“Oh, dear me! Not at all!” Miss Mildmay protested with dignity.

“But the fact is,” he went on without heeding the interruption, “that I hate going near the place, and never do go unless I positively cannot help it. There now! I have apologized. Will you accept my apology?”

“No. Yes. That is — John said that I might ride Tinker this day week, Mr. O’Neil. His knees will be all right by that time.” And her dark eyes peeped over her shoulder with a resolute expression.

“His knees may be all right; but *you* will certainly be all wrong if you do. In short, I cannot allow it.”

“No?”

"No!"

They were looking at one another, and perhaps testing one another's strength.

"I will ride him," Ethel said under her breath.

Mr. O'Neil stood up. Perhaps he had not, at all events he pretended not to have, heard the words.

"Miss Mildmay," he said very gently, "I have taken a liberty which I hope you will not resent. I have bought you a pretty little mare in Dublin, and have brought her down with me to-day. She is a beauty, I think, and perfectly safe and gentle. Will you come to the stables and look at her?"

Truly this was a case of "coals of fire." Ethel grew crimson, then very white. "Mr. O'Neil," she said.

"Well?" And he turned round and paused; for he had already taken a step or two towards the stables. "Well?"

"Mr. O'Neil. Oh! I cannot—I ought not to"—

"To accept a present from me. Well, considering our mutual position, I think you may, unless you have any particular objection to do so. Come and have a look at her at all events."

They went together. Ethel could not repress a little cry of delight. The new arrival was a handsome, thorough-bred bay mare, with a soft, gentle brown eye, and a long sleek nose, which she at once thrust confidingly into Ethel's dress. "She is looking for sugar," the girl cried delightedly. "She wants sugar, just as my own beautiful Eclipse used to do! O you duck! You pretty one!"

"She's as beautiful a craythur as ever stepped into the Phaynix Park, miss," was the unanimous verdict of the admiring audience of stable-men.

She was a trained huntress too, and had carried a "lady of quality," as the advertisements said, "with the Kildare hounds." "I have seen her jump myself," Mr. O'Neil told her, "and I know what she can do. I have every confidence in her. Besides, I bought her from a friend whom I can trust."

What could Ethel do? What could she say? What she did was to get into fits of admiration over her new treasure, so long and so ardent, that there was no doubting their sincerity. What she said was, when at last she tore herself away from the stables, and found herself in the pleasure-ground once more, "Mr. O'Neil," she said, "you know I ought not—you ought not"—

"I ought not to give you the horse? Why not?"

"Because — oh! I can't. You should let me"—

"Pay for her yourself? Well, you have plenty of money, Miss Mildmay, and"—

"Oh, I did not mean that! You are too kind to me, Mr. O'Neil."

"You did mean it," he said, looking at her with a very kind smile. "But you do not wish to pain me by saying it. Miss Mildmay, oblige me,—if it were only for once. Accept Eclipse from me."

"Eclipse!"

"I christened her so the moment I bought her."

Ethel said nothing; but she gave him her hand.

"Then it is settled."

"Yes. And I will not try to thank you."

"That is right."

Of course it was settled, since he willed it. With a dazed feeling, half of pleasure, half of pain, Ethel realized during that afternoon which they passed amicably together in the pleasure-ground, that it was so. With a sense of baffled defeat which was more pain than pleasure, she realized the plain fact, that, in every little skirmish with her guardian, she invariably came off second best; that, in fact, he was stronger than she was, and that he knew well how to use his strength. Just now had he not carried off another little victory? Had she not been treated like a child whose crying is stopped by a sugar-plum, and who is bribed and petted into submission and good-humor? She would not bear it. She could not. The sugar-plum was sticking in her throat, and she could not swallow it. She could not accept such a gift from her guardian. He was not a rich man, as she very well knew, and he could but ill afford such an expensive present as this. His stud was but a very modest one. His own horse, she had heard it casually mentioned, had been lately bought at a bargain at a neighboring fair, and Mrs. O'Neil's carriage-horses were as old as the hills. It had been a long day, she guessed readily enough, since such a costly beauty as Eclipse had graced the stables of Mount Druid. And that it should be hers—actually given to her by him!—the thought was intolerable, quite intolerable. Suddenly she raised her eyes, which, during that five minutes' perplexed, stormy meditation, had been fixed upon the ground. They met those of her guardian.

"I know what you are going to say," he said promptly and with a smile. She colored. "But Mr. O'Neil," she began.

"Very well," he said a little coldly. "Eclipse can be easily sent back again to—

morrow. My friend sold her to me as a favor; but he would not sell her to a stranger."

"Am I a stranger?"

"To him you are, of course, and to me you wish to make yourself one; or rather"—he corrected himself a little bitterly—"to remain one."

He spoke not angrily, but in a tone of deep offence; and it was easy to see that he was indeed deeply, seriously offended.

Ethel looked down again. There was a brief, sharp struggle, at the conclusion of which pride was utterly vanquished and routed.

"How absurd you are! and how huffy! and how quick at jumping at conclusions!" this audacious young lady remarked in an injured tone of voice, and with one of her frankest, most charming, most sunnily irresistible smiles. "Did I not tell you that I would not try to thank you, because I could not? But I do thank you, Mr. O'Neil, all the same."

And so the matter was at rest,—really and finally this time.

Mrs. O'Neil, returning in due time from her drive, found them together in the pleasure-ground still, though it was late, and the dressing-bell had already rung. The old lady was amazed and delighted. It was the first time since Ethel had come to live with them that such a distinct approach to amity had been made. It was the first time that they seemed to be thoroughly at ease in one another's society, and she could hardly believe her ears when she had diplomatically ascertained that in one another's society almost the whole afternoon had been spent. "I found Mrs. Redfern at home, and she was most polite," she informed them; "and I asked the young man and his sister to ride over to see us some day. They perhaps will come to luncheon on Tuesday," she added doubtfully.

Now, Mrs. O'Neil knew perfectly well that the Redferrs would come to luncheon on Tuesday, because she had distinctly invited them to do so, and they had with equal distinctness and considerable eagerness accepted her invitation. But she imparted the intelligence thus doubtfully for two reasons: the first, that, only a short week ago, she had told her son that he really ought to marry Alicia Redfern at last, and that he had very decidedly negatived the proposition, as we know; and the second, that in her clear mind she had laid a deep plan that young Charles Redfern should marry Ethel, and that she felt a little guilty, considering the girl's deep

grief and mourning, at as yet laying the first stone of the edifice her imagination had so solidly erected. And thus it was that she said with affected carelessness, "*Perhaps* they will come on Tuesday," which was an unworthy little piece of cowardice on Mrs. O'Neil's part.

Ethel, all unconscious, heard the intelligence with perfect indifference; but Mr. O'Neil made a wry face and a faint grumble. "Dear me, mother," he began; "what a bore!"

"Arthur, you are growing into quite a bear. You must not be so unsociable and inhospitable," reproved Mrs. O'Neil sharply. And then the dinner-bell rang, and they all went in.

CHAPTER XXV.

GRÄVELY pleasant were the summer days that followed,—bright, peaceful, sunny days, gliding away noiselessly and quickly, working but little outward change, leaving but faintly-visible marks behind them, yet changing and marking things, for all that, in a quiet way of their own, and unsuspectingly laying the seeds of greater things to come.

Ethel's grief had not died, nor even grown much less. It was there, keen and fresh as ever; but the shock which it had produced, and which had so seriously threatened to affect her health, was gradually subsiding. And she herself, stronger now both in mind and body, was able to face life calmly, if not joyfully, and to grow daily more and more convinced of the truth of the great discovery she had recently made,—that in this same perplexing, puzzling, sad, and sorrowful, yet delicious life, there was something still worth living for.

They were certainly very quiet days. Now and then, a visit either from or to the Redferrs broke in upon their monotony; but neighbors, as we know, were an all-but unknown luxury at Mount Druid, and, except the Redferrs, there was scarcely a civilized creature to speak to for miles around. And, by one of those strange eccentricities which characterize social life in the country, the Redferrs and O'Neils, perhaps simply because they were one another's sole neighbors, lived on terms which were coolly friendly, but nothing more. Long ago there had been some foolish quarrel between cantankerous Squire Redfern and Lord O'Neil; but that

was forgotten now. Squire Redfern had retired into private life, snoozing away his few remaining days in a peaceful, doting old age; and Lord O'Neil had become a maniacal recluse. The succeeding generation had sensibly, by mutual consent, profited of the course of events to bury enmity in oblivion, and to renew communications and the amenities of life. But though mutually polite, and appreciative of one another's good qualities, the two families were not what is best expressed by the word "sympathetic," and their reciprocal sentiments had never warmed into intimacy.

Mrs. O'Neil, however, had, as we know, great designs on hands now, and was resolved, in consequence, to inaugurate a new régime. Alice Redfern was no longer young; but she had lately come in for a fortune: and Mrs. O'Neil, instigated by Flaherty, who, in her turn, was instigated by Mrs. Redfern's own maid, was beginning to become alive to the fact that her son might look farther and fare worse in his search for a wife. And then why not catch the son and heir for Ethel? He was a promising young man, good, amiable, well spoken of, and rich: in fact, as it appeared to Mrs. O'Neil, ready made for the purpose. Mrs. O'Neil and Flaherty had it all at their fingers'-ends already, and were busily hatching wonderful eggs together.

And of course this was the meaning of that invitation to luncheon, and of the many little plots and plans with which they diversified the monotony of the next few weeks. So far as the Redferrs were concerned, Mrs. O'Neil's friendly advances were responded to readily enough. Charlie was young and ardent, and set about admiring Ethel at once. And the sedate Alicia, too, seemed inclined to smile upon Mr. O'Neil. It was not their fault if the process of hatching turned out to be a rather slow one, and there seemed to be a screw loose somewhere. Whose fault was it? Apparently Mrs. O'Neil knew whose it was, or, at all events, thought she did.

"Why on earth did you throw difficulties in the way of that ride young Charles Redfern was proposing to-day?" she inquired testily one evening, suddenly waking up with her wonted vivacity out of her after-dinner nap, and finding her son by chance in the room.

"What ride? Oh, yes, to be sure! Did I throw difficulties in the way of it?" Mr. O'Neil inquired innocently.

"Of course you did, Arthur, and you are perfectly well aware of it too. And I must say," she went on with a severe bob

of her head, "that it was not very kind or considerate of you, considering that"—

"Considering what, mother?" as she paused.

"That Mr. and Miss Redfern had the civility to propose it, and that—that I suppose all the young people would have liked it," she added with slightly nervous haste.

"What young people, in the name of wonder?" demanded Mr. O'Neil, opening his eyes.

"How tiresome you are, Arthur! and how dull! Why, all of you, of course!"

He burst out laughing. "Do you mean me, mother, and Miss Redfern? Well, we are mature young people, to say the least of it. Poor, poor mother!" And he caressed her pretty white hand softly.

But the old lady was testy and cross, and not inclined to be coaxed into good humor so easily. "I don't mean you at all. I sometimes think of somebody else besides you, Arthur. Where is the use of thinking of you, or trying to do any thing for you, you obstinate, provoking boy?" she demanded pettishly. Then, with a sly, anxious side-glance, "I was thinking of young Charlie Redfern and of Ethel," she observed quietly; "and I don't see why they should not enjoy a ride together now and then extremely."

Her son looked up quickly. "Young Redfern only bores Miss Mildmay," he said shortly.

"Humbug, Arthur!"

"But he does; of course, he does. She dislikes seeing strangers. She has said so over and over again."

"Humbug!" repeated Mrs. O'Neil more vehemently than before.

"But, mother"—

"Humbug!" she repeated *crescendo*. "Dear me! Dear me! What fools men are, to be sure! Why, they can't see the length of their own noses."

"What on earth is there to see? What are you driving at? Do you mean to say that"— and he broke off with a flush and a suddenly disturbed look in his face.

"I don't mean to say any thing,—not a word. I only mean to say that—that it is natural that young people—a young man and a young woman"—she added explicitly, "should like to be together."

Mr. O'Neil was silent for a minute or two, his elbow resting on the mantelpiece, his eyes fixed upon the floor.

"I believe that the ride is to come off to-morrow or the day after," he observed then. "I think it was settled." Then suddenly, and perhaps a shade sharply, though

he laughed, "That will never be a match, mother, if that is what you mean," he said. "Young Redfern is a good fellow, but ordinary, commonplace. She'd never care for him."

"He'll have a fine property some day, though," replied the old lady promptly and complacently; "and it would, to my mind, be a nice and suitable thing. But, of course, I did not mean any thing of the sort,—of course not," she went on, drawing herself up with dignity. "I only suspect that—that from what I hear, that they would like it; and—and then as to age, you see, and all that sort of thing, Arthur, why, they would suit one another very nicely," the old lady concluded hurriedly.

"Ah, yes, very nicely!" and he crossed the room to the window rather abruptly, and remained with his back towards her, gazing out into the dim, fading light, and at the stars, just beginning to glimmer in the pale, yellowish sky.

The lamp had not as yet been brought in; and his mother peered anxiously, and with a perturbed face, through the dusky room after his tall, dark figure. The old lady was indeed troubled. She was wringing her soft, white hands nervously. Words were trembling upon her lips; but, strange to say, she had the unwonted discretion not to, after her usual fashion, blurt them out, until she had at least weighed them. Grave and solemn words they were. Her mother's heart was yearning. All her passionate love for her son was rising up within her. A cruel perplexity was haunting her brain,—a perplexity which she would have given worlds, and was yet horribly afraid, to solve.

Never since that memorable evening at Nice, which preceded the day of Col. Mildmay's death, and on which her son had horrified her by the passionate avowal of his love for Ethel, had he ever allowed himself to be betrayed into a word or a sign which could cause the old lady the slightest uneasiness or misgiving. Mrs. O'Neil could not make it out. She could not understand—hardly, indeed, believe in this iron will, this stern self-control, which could give a man the strength to live in the same house, and on terms of constant and intimate intercourse, with a pretty, charming young girl, whom he had confessed that he loved with all his heart, and yet to treat her with the coolness of an ordinary friendship, the calm, kindly courtesy which his position towards her required. To the old lady it had been and was still the most mysterious puzzle she had ever yet come across; such a marvel,

indeed, that she could not grapple with it, and was gradually making up her mind to set it aside, and to persuade herself that she had, in that confused and dreadful time at Nice, dreamt those wild, heartbreaking words—"And yet—and yet I believe, I know, that I love her with all my heart, mother"—with which her son had, as it were, allowed his piteous confession to be wrung from him.

To some minds, calm and clear as pure and limpid water, it is easier to ignore and disbelieve, than to attempt to understand, inexplicable complications and incongruities. Mrs. O'Neil's was one of these.

She could not understand, therefore she disbelieved. She had watched closely and anxiously. She had waited nervously and tremulously. She had observed first the cold estrangement; then the slow, gradual, tacit reconciliation; and now the sort of cool, pleasant friendliness which had within the last few weeks grown up between her son and his ward. And, having observed and thought over it all, Mrs. O'Neil had all but come to the serene conclusion that she had been the victim to her imagination, when she had fancied that her Arthur, great, strong, and noble as he was in her eyes, and who, up to this, had been so despairingly proof against all the fascinations and wiles of maidenhood, had yet told her, actually shouted into her startled ears, the fact that he loved Ethel Mildmay with all his heart.

Most people, as we know, dearly like comfortable conclusions. Mrs. O'Neil liked them most particularly; and this especial conclusion was about the most comfortable one she had as yet ever come to. Some months ago, at Nice, she had, it is true, indulged in some romantic day-dreams about her son and Ethel. Then she had been foolish enough to fancy that the young girl would make a nice wife for Arthur, and a most lovable and seductive daughter-in-law for herself. But time and the course of events had opened her eyes, and altered her judgment. A nineteen-year-old maiden,—her pretty head crammed with stuff and nonsense, filled, too, with vanity and conceit,—a saucy, romantic, silly chit of a girl, was, she had quite made up her mind, the very, very last wife she would soberly choose to make her son's happiness, even if—Ah, there it was; there it was! Even if—even if that same romantic, silly, saucy chit of a girl would ever condescend to accept of such a husband. Mrs. O'Neil saw with despairing clearness that she would not; and being a sensible, clever woman, to whom the fitness of things was

habitually the standard of things, and who, remembering her own youth, could understand why a girl of nineteen would not care to marry a man of forty, had resigned herself to circumstances, and had pleasantly resolved to make the best of them.

But to-night, she did not exactly know why, some faint misgiving was troubling her, some teasing doubt was tormenting her. Five minutes and more passed, the old lady wrapped in perplexed meditation upon the sofa, and her son gazing steadily out of the window in profound silence. At last Mrs. O'Neil's mind was made up. She could not bear it any longer. Any certainty would be better than this troublous uncertainty. Flesh and blood could bite its tongue and force it into silence up to a certain point; but, that point once reached, it should and must speak. Besides, was it not her duty to speak? was it not her bounden duty to utter words of warning and sense and sympathy?

"Arthur?" she began tremblingly at last.

"Yes, mother;" but he did not turn round.

"Arthur, I wish"—

This time he did turn, and came over and stood by her sofa, looking down at her.

"Well, mother, what is it you wish?"

"I wish that— But what is the use of my wishing any thing?" she broke off petulantly: "nobody pays the least attention to any thing I ever say."

Her son moved a little impatiently, but he spoke good-humoredly. "What is it that you wish, mother?"

"That—that you would marry Alice Redfern, Arthur; a good, nice, sensible girl!"

Suddenly, but quite quietly, Mr. O'Neil broke in upon his persistent parent's oft-repeated sermon, so oft repeated that every single word was known by heart by this time. "By the way, mother," he said, "I got a letter to-day which contained—but here, you may as well read it."

"A letter!—from whom, Arthur? A foreign letter too," as he placed in her hand a thin envelope.

"Yes: it is from Christine Del—Madame Barbier, as she is now, I mean."

"Indeed! And what in the world does she write to you about?"

The diversion was complete. Mrs. O'Neil was off at a tangent. "I must say," she observed severely, "that I don't exactly see why a young married foreign woman should"—

"Nonsense, mother!" Mr. O'Neil interrupted impatiently. "We write to one another constantly, as it is quite proper and

correct that we should; for, see, there are no secrets, since I give you the letter to read. I give it to you, because Madame Barbier mentions it in a report which—which may interest you."

"Indeed, indeed!" And the old lady was all excitement and curiosity. "Ring for the lamp, Arthur; ring for the lamp! There is not light to see. What is the report, though? You may as well tell me, and then I'll read it afterwards."

Mr. O'Neil told her. Christine, since her marriage, lived at Nice,—it was henceforth to be her home; and to Nice the rumor had come, on what the writer said was, she believed, good authority, that young Count O'Neil had lately added a fresh conquest to his already crowded list, and was shortly to be married to a young and charming heiress, the only daughter of a French nobleman.

Mrs. O'Neil was torn in two by the intelligence. "The impostor! the audacious impostor!" she cried. "Here is another fool, or set of fools, taken in by his bare-faced lying and deceit." But the next instant consoling thoughts suggested themselves. "I'm glad, delighted! that silly child's eyes will be opened for her, now at least, I trust. So much for his frantic love and ardent declarations. What an escape she had! Thank God! Thank God! To think—to think that the goose had actually run away with this impudent adventurer!"

"Then, will you tell Miss Mildmay?" Mr. O'Neil asked a little uneasily.

"Tell her! Of course I'll tell her the very first thing. I would think it wrong, downright wrong, not to tell her at once."

"But it may surprise and shock her. Besides, it may not be true: reports are as often lies as not; and I thought—yes; I really did think that the young fellow was in earnest. If I were you, mother"—

"Surprise and shock her! Stuff and nonsense, Arthur! The sooner she is surprised and shocked, the better. I will"—

But she paused suddenly. At that very moment the servant appeared, carrying the lamp; and behind the lamp, with its light streaming full upon her, came Ethel.

How pretty she looked!—just then, how very pretty!—her color heightened into a delicate flush by the evening air, for she had just come in, and her fair hair slightly and becomingly disarranged by the breeze.

Mrs. O'Neil looked at her admiringly, but, not for the first time in her life, a little, a very little, wickedly. Why was the girl so pretty? Why so young? And why had that wretched, uncomfortable suspicion

started into life again, after being so comfortably dead and buried, that her son cared for her?

"Put the lamp over here, William, here, quite close to me," she commanded the footman. "I want to read something most particularly. Dear me! Dear me! where are my spectacles? A letter, my dear," she explained with a pleasant smile to Ethel, who, having descended the spectacles on the floor, had picked them up, and was handing them to her, — "a letter which Arthur has got from Madame Barbier, your friend of Nice, you know; and I hear that there is some very interesting news in it."

"Is there?" Ethel inquired, faintly curious; but, as she had herself heard from Christine only a day or two ago, the intelligence did not quite produce the effect which little Mrs. O'Neil had intended.

Profound stillness reigned in the library for some minutes: at least, the only sounds which disturbed it were the ticking of the clock, and the rustling of the thin, crisp, foreign paper upon which Christine's letter was written. Mrs. O'Neil, spectacles on nose, was diligently reading it. Her son, his elbow resting upon the mantle-piece, a favorite attitude of his, was standing a little in the shade, and with a dark, grave look in his eyes, was watching Ethel, who had seated herself opposite the urn, and was preparing — as she had fallen into the habit of doing, to save Mrs. O'Neil trouble — to pour out tea. But, though the teapot and cups were ready there expectant, she had not begun operations yet. Perhaps the tea was not yet drawn, or, more likely, the girl had fallen into one of her frequent dreaming-fits, and had forgotten all about it; for the urn hissed away noisily for several minutes, and the tea must have been gradually degenerating into a stew: and yet she sat there motionless and abstracted, looking straight out before her, yet evidently seeing nothing. No: she was not seeing any thing. — nothing, at least, of the sensible objects before her. The mention of Christine's name had carried her back to the past; and there she was, thinking over the French girl's odd little romance, and the determination with which she had resolved to be happy, or at least contented, and to marry the excellent but unattractive Barbier. To Ethel this queer bit of practicality and hard common sense seemed a sadly incongruous and flat ending to an interesting and sentimental story. To her mind it was a dull and provoking dénouement, — the more provoking as Christine invariably wrote to her in a contented and happy strain, and had more than once

assured her that the experiment she had made was turning out well, and that Jules was a most satisfactory husband. "Satisfactory! what a strange word to apply to a husband," Miss Mildmay was reflecting at this very moment with some disdain, — disdain which deepened the color in her violet eyes, and made her guardian marvel curiously what deep thoughts were flitting through her brain.

It was just then that Mrs. O'Neil, having completed her lecture, looked up through her spectacles, drawing a long breath. "Upon my word!" she observed, "that is news, and no mistake about it."

Ethel started, so did her guardian: the sound of the old lady's voice breaking in upon the stillness effectually roused them both.

"What is the news, Mrs. O'Neil?" the girl inquired, pouring out the tea at last.

"That young coxcomb, Mary Anne Irwin's son, you know, my dear, is going to be married: that's all."

"Count O'Neil to be married? I don't believe it, — not a word of it," Miss Mildmay said very sharply, the teapot suspended in her hand, and the black, overdrawn tea running out all over the white tablecloth.

A sharp look of pain crossed Mr. O'Neil's face, as with a strong effort he withdrew his eyes from Ethel, and turned round to his mother. "It is a mere report. Certainly it may not be true," he observed in a cold voice.

"It is true, of course, perfectly true," asserted Mrs. O'Neil decidedly, and waxing angry. "There are fools beyond counting in this world; and that clever, bad woman, my daughter-in-law, will never be at a loss to find people to take in and bamboozle. She is bamboozling these French people as she has bamboozled many others before this," she concluded with significant severity.

"I don't believe it." It was all that Ethel said; and then she suddenly discovered that the table-cloth was deluged with the overdrawn tea, and with her lips tightly compressed, and an ominous flush upon her cheeks, she silently filled the remaining cups. And it was the only remark the girl made; though Mrs. O'Neil gave her Christine's letter to read, and tried hard to impress upon her that there was no reason to doubt the accuracy of the intelligence. At last she gave it up in despair. Ethel's proud, impossible coldness and incredulity drove the good old lady wild; but she could not get the better of it for all that; and days and days passed, and, after that

first evening, the subject was, by tacit consent, dropped, and no further discussion raised as to the truth or falsehood of Christine's news.

It was on another evening, some weeks after this, that Ethel and her guardian were together in the pleasure-ground. It had been a very warm day, and the Redferrs and they had, during the afternoon, taken a long ride, for *comme femme veut, Dieu veut*, and Mrs. O'Neil's resolution had carried the day, and produced a pretty constant intercourse between the "young people." It was warm still; the birds were singing faint good-nights; the bees were droning themselves asleep, and the flowers languidly closing. Nature seemed to be in a languid, lazy mood: and so, too, it seemed was Ethel; for, instead of setting out upon her usual walk, she lingered in the pleasure-ground, and informed Max, who was dutifully awaiting her pleasure, that she was too tired to stir. "We will rest ourselves this evening," she told him; and, suiting action to words, she took possession of a garden-seat.

"Do you know that I was just going to ask you to do that?" her guardian said to her with a smile, and drawing near: "I wanted to talk to you."

"Did you?"

"Yes. I have had my walk, the one I believe you usually take,—up to the top of the hill; and I have had a great, long look over at Castle Garvagh, and now—Yes, it is very pleasant to sit still here."

It was a strange speech, and made in a peculiar tone of voice. Ethel looked puzzled. "Those 'great, long looks' at Castle Garvagh are nothing particularly new, I should say," she observed a little dryly. "I do believe there is not a day that you don't indulge in one."

"Very few days, I confess;" and he laughed quietly.

"And I believe, too, that 'Castle Garvagh' will be found written on your heart when you come to die," she went on a little disdainfully. "Lord O'Neil was right, after all. The whole family thinks that it is *the* one place in the whole world; and as to you, Mr. O'Neil, you think of nothing else but it."

"Do I not?" he asked quickly. Then, after a moment's pause, "Any true O'Neil must be fond of the old place," he said quietly.

Any true O'Neil! Ethel recollects suddenly the mocking gayety with which Count O'Neil had laughed at his relation's ardent, enthusiastic attachment to the "old place."

Very abruptly she said, plucking to pieces, as she spoke, a beautiful, tardy "Gloire de Dijon," which Charlie Redfern had brought her that day, "Do you think it is true that Count O'Neil is going to be married, Mr. O'Neil?"

"You say not, Miss Mildmay."

"But I don't know for certain: how should I? Is it true, Mr. O'Neil?"

"I can't give you certain information. I have heard again that it is,—from another source."

She was silent for a minute or two, tapping the ground with her foot. When she spoke again, it was on quite a different subject. "I declare that the leaves are turning already," she said: "surely summer is not over!"

"Nearly: we are in the middle of September now."

"Is it possible?"

It was possible, true. Noiselessly the summer had glided away, as quiet, peaceful times do glide, slipping like running water through our careless fingers; and now golden Autumn was tipping the ends of her trailing, flowery garment.

"Then time has passed quickly at Mount Druid, has it?" he inquired.

"Yes, it has, very quickly. I can hardly believe that I have been here nearly five months now."

"Can you not? I am glad to hear it."

"This time next year," Ethel went on laughing, "you shall have nearly got rid of me, Mr. O'Neil: your guardianship will be drawing to an end. My birthday is, you know, the first day of the new year. Next New-Year's Day I shall be twenty; and the one after that"—

"Twenty-one and free. What a joyful New-Year's Day it will be, Miss Mildmay! will it not?"

"To you, Mr. O'Neil."

"To you."

"It would be exceedingly ungrateful of me to say so," Ethel said demurely. "You are very kind to me."

"A bearable guardian, after all. Leave out the gratitude, though, and tell the truth."

Ethel looked about her,—at the golden-tipped trees, at the sleeping flowers, at the long, deep shadows, at the gray, friendly old house.

"I am sure that I shall be very sorry to leave Mount Druid," she said simply and earnestly.

There was a pause; then suddenly she asked, "You said that you wanted to speak to me, Mr. O'Neil. What was it about?"

"Did I? Oh, yes!" But he did not speak, for all that.

"What was it about?" she repeated. Then, "By the way, you told me nearly two months ago that you would probably go away for some time,—to America, I believe. Do you remember? You have altered your plans, of course?"

"Altered them? Why should I have altered them?"

"Because I have heard nothing more on the subject."

"Have you not? No, of course not." He was speaking like a man in a dream; and Ethel, looking at him wonderingly, saw that there was a dazed, peculiar expression in his eyes such as she had never seen there before. "No, of course not," he repeated. "And yet I am going away tomorrow, Miss Mildmay. It was what I wished to tell you. You'll take care of Max for me; will you not?" he added with a faint smile, and bending down to caress the dog.

"To-morrow, Mr. O'Neil?"

"Yes, to-morrow. I hate preparations and leave-takings; and so—I have not told my mother yet," he added hastily.

"Not told her? Poor, poor Mrs. O'Neil!"

"I wanted to save her unnecessary pain. You will take care of her also, Miss Mildmay; will you not? My mother and Max—I trust them both to you."

"Yes," Ethel promised slowly and gravely.

"And of yourself, for my sake,—for your guardian's sake, you know," he added hastily and with a short laugh: "I am responsible for your welfare."

Ethel turned away. She felt sad and sorry and hurt, but was too proud to show it.

"I hate good-bys," Mr. O'Neil said, "and so will not say it even to you, my ward."

And with that he left her, and walked into the house.



CHAPTER XXVI.

IT was a year and more before Mr. O'Neil returned. When he had first gone away, he had talked of three months' absence, then of six, then of nine; but the business which had brought him to America lingered on with distracting slowness, and latterly he had given up fixing any definite date for his return. For the last few weeks, indeed, there had been no letter from him at all, and his mother was fretting and fuming over this strange silence.

"Perhaps he is ill, or some accident has happened; or perhaps even they have killed him," she announced one evening to Ethel, waking up with her usual vivacity from her after-dinner nap. "I tell you, child, something dreadful must have occurred."

This was, as we know, Mrs. O'Neil's hour of horrors. Ever since her son's departure, about an hour every evening had been devoted to the most desponding and gloomy views concerning his welfare. Recently they had assumed a darker hue even than usual; but this last suggestion was a climax at which her companion could not help laughing.

"Killed him!" she cried. "Is he not in New York? and who on earth is there in New York likely to kill him?" she inquired.

Mrs. O'Neil looked mysterious.

"I have just had a dream," she said; "that is to say," hastily correcting herself, for if she were to be put on the rack she would never acknowledge this after-dinner nap, "I dreamt last night that Arthur was murdered; yes, child, murdered. And by whom do you think? By that bad woman Ernestine."

"O Mrs. O'Neil!"

"A fact, child; a fact! God forgive me for saying it; but she would be capable of it; I verily believe that she would; and you know why too, for you know all our secrets. If Ernestine O'Neil once knew that that unfortunate creature Bridget had betrayed her; if she once thought that Arthur had got into his possession any proofs,—indubitable proofs, such as must and do exist of her wicked imposture,—then she'd stop at nothing: on my honor, I do not think she would."

"I thought Madame O'Neil was in Paris," Ethel observed coldly.

"God knows where she is: sometimes she is here, sometimes there. In one of Arthur's letters a month or two ago, he mentioned that she actually was in or coming to New York, to dog and watch that poor creature to the last,—to terrify the last chance which God in his mercy would give her to save her wretched soul."

Ethel shuddered.

"Mrs. O'Neil, I don't, I can't, I never shall, believe that your daughter-in-law is the wicked woman you pretend."

Mrs. O'Neil jumped up like a shot, her fair cheeks all afame, and her trim little figure trembling.

"You don't, you can't! Then what do you believe, child? Do you believe that we are liars and impostors? or that they are?"

Which did she believe, indeed? Ethel groaned in spirit. Dark and perplexing as ever was that terrible, perplexing puzzle. No ray of light had dawned upon it yet: at least, none that would satisfy her; none that would either humble the pride or shake the fidelity which held her judgment still in suspense, and would not allow her to acknowledge that she had made a great and egregious mistake. Strange to say, long as she had now lived with Mrs. O'Neil, this was the first time — since that old, miserable, stormy time at Nice, when skirmishes and battles were the order of the day, — that she had actually been once more brought face to face with the despairingly strong, immovable position, — who was right? who was wrong? Upon the day when Col. Mildmay's will had been read, and Mr. O'Neil had been appointed the young girl's guardian, he had gravely, solemnly even, implored his mother to promise him, that, so long as Ethel lived under his roof as his ward, no attempt should be made to induce her to desert the side which she had chosen to adopt in the great family feud. He himself was resolved scrupulously to avoid any approach to the question; and Mrs. O'Neil had given the promise, and, extraordinary to relate, kept it, — kept it till to-night, when, suddenly and unexpectedly, the two ladies found themselves face to face opposite the impregnable fortress, their swords flashing from their scabbards, their martial spirit aroused, in the warlike attitude of old.

One, two, three, and away! Another minute, and they would have probably rushed into the thick of the fray. Probably, too, the fight would have arisen just as much from dulness and *ennui* as any thing else; for there certainly was no especial reason why, after months and months of scrupulous observance of the tacit truce which had been established between them, they should have selected this particular evening for a skirmish. Probably, too, they were both at heart more of the same way of thinking than one of them — a self-willed, self-opiniated, high-spirited young person — would have, for a hundred-pound note, chosen to confess.

It is a calumny often and loudly asserted against the fair sex, that the absence of the male element from the domestic hearth is apt to foster belligerent tendencies; and that it is a calumny is proved by the fact that Ethel and Mrs. O'Neil had lived *tête-à-tête* together for nearly a twelve-month, and had yet never had a serious quarrel. But to-night mischief was in the

air. The day had been long and dull. Probably they were beginning to weary ever so little of one another's undisturbed society. Perhaps, too, both being of a pugnacious temperament, they had suddenly become alive to the absolute necessity of a break of some sort or other in the monotony of their amicable intercourse.

One, two, three, and —

"God bless my soul!" suddenly cried Mrs. O'Neil. "What in the world is Max barking in that fashion, just like a lunatic, for? Call Paddy, child! call John! call Flaherty! There must be thieves in the place!"

Ethel had started up from her low stool at Mrs. O'Neil's feet, and was standing like a statue in the middle of the room.

"Max is barking a welcome," she said, "not a warning. It is some one he knows. Who can it be?"

And at that very moment, suddenly and unexpectedly as he had departed, the door of the library opened, and Mr. O'Neil appeared. His mother screamed. Ethel laughed. He himself did not laugh exactly; but he looked joyous, radiant, like a man who is glad to come home again.

It took a little time to elucidate the situation, — to explain how letters had been written, and must have been miscarried; and how events had taken an unlooked-for quick turn; and how a passage in a ship secured at the very last moment had left no time to announce his immediate coming.

"But I flattered myself that you would be glad to see me, mother, whether prepared or no," Mr. O'Neil told her, holding her hand, and smiling down at her one of his gladdest smiles.

The old lady was between laughing and crying.

"Glad to see you!" she repeated. "You don't deserve that we should tell you so. Glad to see you! The fact is, that we have been longing for you, dying for you. We thought you never would come back; did we not, child? We have nearly died of dulness without you."

"I could not help it, mother. I could not escape a moment sooner. Well, and how have you both been?" with a quick glance towards the fireplace, where, early in the year as it was, a bright little fire was merrily sparkling, and where Miss Mildmay was standing, smiling at him.

"Pretty well, Arthur; pretty well. Ah! you mean Ethel. She has been well enough too, and naughty enough," with a sly smile and wink. "But it will keep, it will keep; and I'll not make the child

blush," she added with a gladsome little laugh, "by telling tales out of school before her face."

But, as we know, very few things ever did keep with Mrs. O'Neil, particularly those things to the category of which Miss Mildmay's misdemeanors belonged. It often happens — always, indeed — that, when people who love one another meet after long separations, their hearts are too full, their nerves in too rickety and unsafe a condition, to allow them to do any thing but laugh and jest in a foolish, aimless sort of fashion, and generally behave themselves as if they had parted only yesterday. It is one of the aggravating consequences of the faulty mechanism of our natures, which, in spite of ourselves, so often makes our words and actions such a ridiculous travesty of our thoughts and feelings. And thus it was with Mrs. O'Neil and her son just now.

"My ward has been conducting herself badly, has she?" he asked, laughing. "What is your complaint, mother? I have a right to know."

Mrs. O'Neil bobbed her head three times.

"You must know that the child has got an admirer, Arthur," she announced solemnly.

"One? Twenty, more likely," Mr. O'Neil said with a smile.

"Mrs. O'Neil! how tiresome, how ridiculous!" and Miss Mildmay blushed, and looked a little foolish.

"Twenty fiddlesticks, Arthur!" the old lady interrupted petulantly. "Where in the world would she be likely to find twenty admirers in this God-forsaken country, where civilized human beings of any sort, men or women, are as rare as green peas in November? So you have learnt gallantry at last, have you, over the water?" she inquired slyly.

"Not much, I am afraid, from our smart first-cousins. But you have not been here ever since, mother, you know. You starred it in Dublin last winter, remember. Plenty of gay gallants there, I should say."

"Yes; but Ethel would not go out, and was as demure and quiet as a mouse; would not look at anybody indeed, though we did make the acquaintance of a few young men, except — ah, yes! the hero came after us there, too, I can tell you."

"Mrs. O'Neil, it is not true," here put in Miss Mildmay, rather vehemently, which was the first consecutive sentence she had uttered since Mr. O'Neil had entered the room; and, having uttered it, she suggested the advisability of providing some food for

the traveller, and made her exit for the purpose of seeing after it.

But though presently a dainty repast, no doubt called into existence under her auspices, made its appearance, Miss Mildmay herself did not bear it company. Perhaps they did not miss her: at all events, it was not for a long, long time, that any inquiry was made as to why she did not return to the drawing-room; and, when it was made, it was found that the young lady had gone to bed, and, from her refusal to answer any questions, was, it was to be supposed, fast asleep. Yet Ethel was not asleep at all; though her candle was out, and the book with which she had tried to beguile the long and slightly lonely evening by the improper habit of reading in bed, pitched away rather weariedly. Perhaps she was feeling a little sad, perhaps a little excited; perhaps she was feeling nothing at all, except that it was impossible to go asleep; for sleep she did not until early morning, when the thrushes were cooing their freshest and sweetest love-songs, and lulled her at last kindly to rest.

"Who is the hero, mother?" Mr. O'Neil had inquired so soon as his ward had walked out of the room with the stately yet girlish step which had often enough made him smile. He was smiling now, looking after her. "Who is the hero? Charlie Redfern; eh?"

"Just so, Arthur; and he is head over ears in love."

"Indeed!"

"Head over ears. And they are all delighted. Mrs. Redfern has grown sweet as sugar of late. No bounds to their civilities. There's what it is to have a girl with a fortune on one's hands. But it will do very nicely, very nicely indeed," she concluded complacently.

"What will do? Oh, nonsense!" And Mr. O'Neil poked the fire.

"Nonsense, Arthur! What objection do you see to it, pray? The young man is rich, gentlemanlike, good-looking, amiable. I am sure that I"—

"But she is not going to marry him, mother, for all that, you know."

"Well!" the old lady began in a tone of the utmost perplexity and provocation. "I don't see what you're laughing at, Arthur," she broke out in high dudgeon. "I declare, you are as bad as Ethel herself, who is the sauciest, silliest, most provoking girl that ever lived. That child would flirt with a poker, Arthur, if there was nothing else at hand,—why, she flirts with poor old Dr. O'Toole when she hasn't got young Redfern: in short"—

" Well mother ! "

" The sooner she is married, the better," Mrs. O'Neil said, winking through her spectacles; " and I am delighted, Arthur, that you have come home to see about it."

" High time for me to come home, I think," said Mr. O'Neil with a laugh; " and so she is flirting with poor Charlie, is she ? "

" Outrageously, Arthur, outrageously ! But she'll find herself caught, and wings clipped in a twinkling, and lucky for her too. Redfern Park is a cosey nest enough, and —"

" And Redfern *mère* a charming parent-bird. Ugh, mother ! "

" Arthur, how silly you are ! as if such trifles signified. Now, do you suppose that your wife, whoever she turns out to be, will let *me* stand in her way ? "

" You are too little to stand in anybody's way," her son said fondly.

" But " — and here all the advantages of the contemplated alliance were held forth upon ; young Redfern's good qualities, and the suitableness of the match ; how everybody wished it, everybody of sense that is, and everybody approved of it, &c., till the climax was reached. " And you know, Arthur," concluded the old lady impressively, " there is not another man in the country for the child to marry ; and so that is the beginning and end of the matter."

" Is there not ? "

" Of course there is not. And, reflect, that in three months she will be of age, your guardianship will be over, her uncle will probably have come to take her away, and we shall lose her forever, and have the disgrace into the bargain of not having married her."

And Mrs. O'Neil, having delivered herself of this gloomy horoscope, lay back on the sofa with a sigh of satisfaction, such as people give when they feel that they have accomplished their duty.

Suddenly she exclaimed, " Arthur, how well you are looking, — how well ! You have grown young, ten years younger ! "

He shook his head, and laughed.

" But I say you have ! Hold the lamp up to your face, and let me look at it."

Smilingly he obeyed her. He was looking well and young ; and there was a light in his eye and a color in his cheek which the old lady had not seen in them for many a long day.

" Arthur," she said in a suddenly altered voice, and holding out her two hands, — " Arthur, I have been afraid to ask ; but I see now that I may. Arthur " —

He took not her hands only, but her slight,

fragile little body in his arms. " You may, mother. Thank God ! thank God ! "

" Is she dead, Arthur ? is the poor creature dead ? "

" Yes."

There was a pause. " And," Mrs. O'Neil whispered.

" And before she died she gave me these. Mother, I have won Castle Garvagh, — won it at last ! "

His voice trembled with subdued excitement ; and as he spoke he laid his mother gently back upon the sofa, and placed in her hands a little packet of yellow, faded letters.

" Arthur, what are they ? what are they ? Oh, thank God for this ! " and then and there the flood-gates broke down, and the gentle old lady burst into a passion of tears.

What were they ? It was some time before her son could tell, or she could listen. The history was a long one, but can be told in a very few words here. As we already know, the Irwins' old servant Bridget had been for years and years the object of Arthur O'Neil's suspicions and watchfulness. Rightly or wrongly, there was a popular impression abroad, not only amongst those personally interested, but also in the country for miles and miles around, wherever the name of O'Neil of Castle Garvagh was known, that this woman was an accomplice in the great fraud which the foreign party, which was the designation given to Count O'Neil's pretensions, had practised by the change of children, of which they were accused. But suspicion is not proof ; and though suspicion took root, and flourished in a strange, silent, mysterious fashion of its own, — being whispered at lonely firesides, being talked of at funerals — one of

the most sprightly diversions of the country — and fairs, being told to children by their parents, cropping up here and there in high circles as well as in low, growing, in fact, into a deep-rooted, wide-spread conviction, — still years and years had passed, and suspicion had never become certainty. They had been years of cruel uncertainty and suspense, of tantalizing, maddening almost, hopes and dreads. Often and often during them, Arthur O'Neil's heart had sunk and his courage failed. Often and often he had lost patience, given up hope, and despaired of success. Often and often his soul had sickened within him, and he had felt that no prize, no triumph, not even the prize and triumph of vindicating his rights, and seeing the dream of his whole life fulfilled, would compensate for the heart-wearing, pleasure-destroying, intolerable state of doubt and suspense in which he

was condemned to see the best years of his life, his whole youth, pass away. No wonder that he was a grave and old man even for his years ; no wonder that his hair was gray before its time, and that lines of thought and care and anxiety traced themselves early in his face ; no wonder that he was reserved and pre-occupied, and often apparently cold and abstracted, and that people called him proud, and at the first brush were little disposed to warm towards him, or to be "hail fellow, well met" with him. One object does not engross a man's life for nothing ; one thought cannot with impunity fill his brain, nor one great desire, his heart. Men have gone mad, or have become soured, or have grown unkind or hard, or reckless or wicked, from slighter causes than this one. But Mr. O'Neil had been saved from this. He was at forty neither a bad man nor a soured one, but simply one whose mind and heart were filled with one great object,—that of proving himself to be, if he really was it, Lord O'Neil's true and rightful heir.

Till forty. But then a day had come at last when the sun was shining, and the sea breaking in clear, beautiful waves upon a white beach, and he, looking at it all with an abstracted, indifferent gaze, and his thoughts far away with the old, well-loved place in all its dreary grandeur and wild beauty, had suddenly awaked from the one all-absorbing dream ; a day when the sound of a sweet, gay voice close at hand had roused him, and, raising his eyes, he had seen a bright young girl, with wavy fair hair and a sunny smile, beside him. And then the charm was broken, or rather worked. Mr. O'Neil fell in love.

This was his story. To-night, sitting in his happy home, by his mother's side, looking back upon his life, he marvelled how he had borne it. No wonder that the past, that long, weary, loneless, miserably hoping and fearing past, filled him now with a sort of sad, perplexed, yet glad surprise.

How had he lived through it ? how had he managed even to grow accustomed to, to become passively submissive to, its heavy dead-weight ? How had he borne to have gone through life with this mill-stone round about his neck ? — this cloud of doubt, of tantalization, of grasping at shadows, of impotent efforts, of torturing uncertainty, ever hanging over him ? This unfortunate creature, Bridget, had, indeed, led him a life of — looking back upon it now from a haven of comparative security and peace — what seemed little less than torture. She had been his one hope, his one chance ; and she knew it. Wretched, miserable, herself, a

victim of vice and intemperance, torn between remorse and fear, between terror of man's judgment and God's justice, the unfortunate woman had been perpetually vacillating between the vague intention of doing right some day, and the desperate resolve not to do it an instant too soon ; not to die with her secret unconfessed, but not to live with the shame and abject fear of having betrayed it. Thus for years she had been in the habit of throwing out dark hints, writing anonymous letters, making vague promises, trying to extort money, and of keeping Arthur O'Neil on the very tenterhooks of suspense. More than once he had actually gone to America, half induced to do so by the wretched creature's solicitations and promises. Yet, once there, she had invariably managed to elude him or to baffle him, and he would be forced to return home no wiser, no nearer the truth than before. The fact was, the woman was sold, body and soul, to the other side. Not only did the Irwins and Madame O'Neil hold her completely in their power by their gold and protection, but also by their knowledge of some guilty secrets in her life, which they had only to reveal to ruin her. She was, besides, their accomplice ; and, betraying them, she must betray herself. No wonder that they feared the unfortunate creature so little, and were so confident and secure in their wrong-doing. No wonder that they fancied her to be tied hand and foot, and never doubted but that her secret would go down to the grave with her ; and even if it did not, — even if, after these years of silence, she were to speak ; even if the worst came to the worst, and the terrors of the next world were to prove more powerful in anticipation than those of the present, — who would believe her ? Of what worth was the word of a lost woman, whose whole life had been a career of sin and shame ? In any court of law would a claim unbacked, except by such a support, be listened to : it was thought not. Lawyers and great people, having been consulted, wagged their wise wigs, and said no, they thought not. And years passed, and iniquity grew apace, and Madame la Comtesse O'Neil watched and waited patiently, biding her time, living down suspicion and distrust, — now in shadow, now in sunshine, now believed in and flattered and trusted, now given the cold shoulder, and subjected to the countless humiliations and affronts which society so well knows how to offer to a doubtful position. And through it it all she lived unmoved, unruffled, secure, hard, and cold as steel,

smiling her perpetual smile; her glossy hair black as night, her smooth, handsome face unlined. Ah! truly a contrast to her anxious, striving, distracted, tortured brother-in-law! Ah! it is not surprising that old Mrs. O'Neil counted her son's gray hairs with hot tears, and that each tear was rigorously put down to the account of her daughter-in-law, Ernestine.

But to return. Of late years, matters had become worse: Bridget was ill of an incurable, awful disease; and the solution, if solution there ever was to be to the mystery connected with her, was apparently drawing near. The woman had always declared that she would come home to her native land to die; but Death had not waited to be sought, but had come, as he generally does, unsought. At last her disease prostrated her, and she could not move. Then it was that Mr. O'Neil felt that the supreme and final effort must be made. Accompanied by his lawyer, he went to America. It was the old story. The woman would not die; and, until death was staring her in the face, nothing would persuade her that it was so close to her. Weary months went by. Madame O'Neil, too, though her brother-in-law never saw her, had, it was rumored, come to New York, and was doing her part. Bridget, tortured by pain, but her brain unclouded, and her strong will unbroken, was dying by inches. At last, at last, she felt its cold touch; at last she felt and knew that this world was slipping, had almost slipped, away from her, and that for her it no longer contained punishment, or bribe or reward, or hope or fear. And then, not till then, did this strange, resolute, wicked, lost — yet believing with the strong ineradicable faith of her native country — woman confess; making before witnesses a dying deposition of the truth.

And Madame O'Neil knew it, knew it well; and for the second time in her life found herself to be foiled by that grand human foiler, death.

And yet she smiled, and did not believe herself vanquished; was confident and trustful, indeed, still. The worst had come, as she had always known that it might come; and she braved and disdained it. What was it, after all? what was such a confession worth? Well she knew that it would never be received as legal evidence; well she knew, that, though it might influence men's minds, it could not influence their judgment, for she was a clever woman of business as well as a clever woman of the world. This dying confession would not be, she was perfectly aware, worth the paper it was written on in an English court of law. If

that was all she had to fear, she might well be secure and confident still.

But it was not all, though Madame O'Neil believed that it was. Clever and cunning as she was, her slave — the ignorant, uneducated Irishwoman — was cleverer and more cunning than she. Two hours before she died, when she was already speechless, she had pointed out to her attendants a secret drawer, which opened with a spring, and which was part of the old wooden chest in which she kept her clothes: in it lay a small packet of faded letters, dated years and years ago, and signed Mary Anne Irwin. There were only five or six; for Madame O'Neil and her sister were too prudent, except in case of absolute necessity, to trust their great secret to paper: and they were letters, too, which over and over again Bridget had solemnly sworn had been destroyed. But the sharp Irishwoman had not destroyed them for all that, and had, perhaps, hesitated till this supreme moment into whose hands she would deliver them. But right had at last been allowed to triumph. In the end she had given them to Arthur O'Neil; and he, having read them over, and weighed their value, could not doubt that they were conclusive proofs by which the minds of men must be convinced.

CHAPTER XXVII.

M R. O'NEIL seemed to have become another man. His own mother rubbed her eyes, hardly knowing him again. And, as it may be supposed, much less easy did Ethel find it to recognize in this lively, animated, joyous man the grave, reserved, cold guardian of a year ago.

He had been three weeks at home now; and though, every day, he talked of another departure as imminent, he for some mysterious reason delayed to accomplish it. This absence was to be a short one. "Only to last a few days, or a week at most," he assured his mother. In short, it was to be a mere run up to town on business connected with the recent important discoveries which had come to light.

But, short as it was to be, Mr. O'Neil seemed to be uncommonly loath to make it. "Very different from this time last year," Miss Mildmay reflected with a little nervous flutter near the region of her heart, "when he rushed off to America for a year, and never took the trouble of even saying 'good-by' to one. Now, somehow or

other, one feels that he can't tear himself away. Very different, indeed!"

And, having come to this solemn conclusion, the young lady cast a puzzled, furtive look at her guardian, who was lying on the grass at her feet.

It was a romantic attitude and a romantic situation; and Ethel, as we know, was a romantic young lady. Mr. O'Neil had asked her to walk with him this afternoon; and by common consent they had come up the old familiar path through the woods, and had paused to rest at her favorite resting-place on the top of the hill. There were the old bleak brown bogs, and the purple mountains, and the dark Castle Garvagh woods. There was the same chill sea-breeze sweeping across the flat, dreary expanse, and the same solemn, pathetic desolation all around. "The world is the same always," Ethel thought, studying her guardian's face attentively; "but how changed the people in it have become!"

For the matter of that, a year had worked some changes in Miss Mildmay herself. Ethel was in mourning still. Eighteen months had passed since her father's death, and superficial observers might perhaps have fancied that he was forgotten; for the girl had recovered her spirits, color had returned to her face, and happy lights to her eyes. She was gay and merry as of old; but she had not forgotten him for all that, nor ceased to love him,—love him, too, as yet, far better than any thing on earth.

Once or twice lately, Mrs. O'Neil had hinted that black was a "nasty thing" for girls, and that Ethel might, in all conscience, make some change in the sombreness of her attire; but the girl had been deaf, and persisted in wearing her mourning still.

But youth and bright eyes and a happy heart can defy sable itself. Miss Mildmay was looking radiant to-day; and her small black hat and feathers, coquettishly, and, truth to tell, most becomingly, crowned the great pile of her pretty fair hair. Radiant, if perhaps a little grave and thoughtful too; for she was, as we know, perplexing her brain over a puzzle, and puckering her smooth white forehead in the attempt to solve it. Here was the puzzle. What change had come over Mr. O'Neil? "The world is always the same," she reflected; "but how changed the people in it have become!"

Some people, at least. To others the year seemed to have brought no change, to have dragged on its weary length without a single break in the dull daily monotony of existence. Over there, for instance, at

Castle Garvagh, the old lord was hanging on to life still; growing daily feebler, it was said, and more peculiar; becoming more and more of a savage, secluded misanthrope, yet living still. Ethel had only seen him once or twice since; for Mrs. O'Neil hated the Irwins, under whose domination he now seemed to have completely fallen, too intensely to bring herself to go near Castle Garvagh oftener than she could possibly help.

On the other hand, at Redfern Park one or two events had taken place. Alicia, for instance, convinced and disgusted by Mr. O'Neil's abrupt departure last year, had consoled herself in another quarter. And Charlie—ah! but thereto hung a tale. All that is necessary to relate here is, that, a fortnight ago, poor Charlie had paid a certain visit to Mount Druid, after which Ethel had looked pale and penitent, and received a severe sound scolding from Mrs. O'Neil; and the next that was heard of Charlie was, that he had gone to pay a visit at a fashionable house in Scotland, and was having rare sport with the partridges there.

Ethel had behaved badly; at least, so Mrs. O'Neil told her with great severity. The young lady herself drooped her silken lashes over her violet eyes, and said "that she had not meant it," meekly enough at first; but when the old lady irascibly informed her that that was no excuse, and was, indeed, trying hard to turn on remorse, and perhaps reconsideration, Miss Mildmay had fired up.

"I never cared a button for him: so how could I suppose that he cared for me?" she demanded frankly.

"But why don't you care for him, child? He is a handsome young fellow, and good as gold—and rich too. What on earth do you want more?"

"I don't want any thing more; but I don't want him," the young lady lucidly explained.

"But, then, why did you flirt with him?" Mrs. O'Neil demanded severely,—"why did you flirt with him, child?"

And, it so chancing that at that very moment her son entered the room, she appealed to him in his rôle of guardian to decide whether his ward was not a silly, misbehaved, unpracticable young lady.

"There, she has just sent poor young Redfern about his business," she informed him. "What have you got to say to that, Arthur? After flirting with him all!"

"I did not flirt," Ethel broke in, growing all of a sudden very red and flurried. "At least, not much," truth compelled her to admit.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the old lady sardonically. "Do you hear that, Arthur?"

Mr. O'Neil laughed. "Open confession deserves forgiveness," he said. "We must forgive her, mother."

"It has been so dull all the summer!" Miss Mildmay said deprecatingly. "He was the only person one ever saw; and of course — well, of course one could not help being glad to see him. Where was the harm of *that*?" she inquired a little defiantly and with a flashing eye.

"True enough," Mrs. O'Neil confessed. "Arthur, the child would have died of dulness if it had not been for Charlie Redfern. It was a shame for you to have staid away so long!"

"I could not help it, mother: you know I could not. Miss Mildmay knows it too."

"I don't know any thing of the sort," that young lady remarked with a toss of her head, and under her breath.

But Mr. O'Neil heard her words for all that, and gave her a quick, keen look.

"It was a cruel necessity that" —

But his mother interrupted him. "Of course we know that you could not help it, Arthur," she said. "Well, well, child, I suppose you know your own mind, and all the talking in the world won't alter it. But remember that there is not another young man to be had in the country, for love or money; and child, child, it would have been so nice to have had you settled here" —

But at this point, Mrs. O'Neil, looking suddenly up into her son's face, broke off abruptly with a nervous little laugh. "I am an old fool, I believe, for my pains," she said vaguely, — a remark which nobody contradicted.

No more was said about young Redfern or his proposal just then. Indeed, he seemed to be somewhat of a tabooed subject; and, whether by chance or design, his name was seldom mentioned during the days that followed. They were pleasant days. There is no blinking the fact that Ethel was a wretch. She hardly even missed young Redfern's frequent visits. Her guardian was, in his present mood at all events, a pleasanter companion, and, moreover, he was always there: always at hand to amuse her, to entertain her, to anticipate her slightest wish, to obey her tiniest behest; always there to give her, by his altered demeanor towards her, by his deference and devotion and watchful attention, a constant subject of wonderment and fluttering perplexity. Ethel was a true woman; and everybody knows that a true woman's weak point is curiosities. Mr.

O'Neil was tickling her curiosity intensely just now, and filling her mind entirely. One day they rode together, another day they walked: conversation never flagged between them. There was always something to argue about and quarrel over; for quarrels were frequent incidents of their intercourse, serving no doubt to enliven it, and to prevent Miss Mildmay ever feeling it in the least dull or monotonous.

To-day, however, they had not quarrelled — as yet. They had had a quiet, sober, serious walk of it, during which Mr. O'Neil had for the first time openly alluded to the business which had brought him to America, and had finished the sentence which his mother had interrupted some days ago, about its having been a cruel necessity that had compelled him to remain so long absent from home.

"So much precious time lost to me," he said, "out of my guardianship. But it could not be helped. And after all," he added, giving her a quick look, and with a half-laugh, — "after all, the prize has been well worth the cost: at least, I trust that it will turn out so."

Mr. O'Neil was in love; but as yet, at least, he was a practical, sensible man. The compliment implied by the first half of the sentence was, to Ethel's thinking, utterly ruined by the cold calculation of the second half.

"How desperately worldly you are, Mr. O'Neil!" she said contemptuously. "Do you, then, care so *very* much for money?"

He gave her an amused look. "It is by no means unpleasant to be rich," he said frankly. "I have no doubt that I should like it excessively."

Ethel arched her slender white throat, and looked scornful, as high-minded, romantic young people are apt to look when such unromantic, commonplace statements are made.

"Excessively," he repeated, in nowise disconcerted. "The world is all wrong if you will; but, wrong or right, money now-a-days means most things that are pleasant. It means pleasure, amusement, esteem, respect, affection, even love, Miss Mildmay. Yes, love," he went on, giving the young girl a quick, rather defiant glance, though he smiled. "A rich man may choose his wife; while a poor man — such as I am at present — is condemned to love in silence and in vain."

Ethel grew red as fire; but she shivered, as she always did when under a strong emotion. There certainly was no mistaking his meaning. The wife whom it had pleased him to select was to be bought, then,

with gold. He was strong and self-reliant enough for this,—to be content to buy her—herself—not her affection. Proud man as he was, he was not too proud to stoop to this.

The discovery revolted her. Very slowly she raised her grave face, and steadily looked at him.

"The wife who lets herself be chosen in that fashion is but a poor creature, Mr. O'Neil," she said,—"a poor creature, not worth much."

"She is worth a great deal to me," he replied promptly; "so much, indeed, that, though I would rather be poor with her than rich without her, still I can humble myself sufficiently to long, to long with all my heart, to be rich for the sake of having something worthy of her to offer her."

Ethel shook her head, and smiled. "You are deceiving yourself, Mr. O'Neil: there is not a grain of humility in your nature. You wish to be rich that you may buy your wife as you might buy a handsome horse or a pretty piece of furniture. Well, I wish you every luck in your search." And she laughed gayly and a little scornfully.

Mr. O'Neil colored, and bit his lips. The pointed arrow had struck home. "It will be a successful search, please God," he said quickly. "Do you really wish me luck, Miss Mildmay?"

"To be sure. Wishes are such cheap things!"

"Remarkably so."

They looked at one another, and laughed. It was a strange sort of courtship; more, indeed, of a warfare than a courtship. It was a difficult conquest, and every step needed a victory. But a battle-royal was imminent. Perhaps the girl, with her blazing cheeks, and eyes that somehow seemed to have lost some of their usual self-possession and power of looking straight out before them, felt the situation a somewhat overpowering one: at all events, she certainly was delighted at the chance of an escape; and when one of Mr. O'Neil's laboring men, passing by at the moment, paused to speak to him, she felt a very undignified sense of relief. The man was in trouble. He and his neighbor had quarrelled about a "bit of land;" and by common consent the "master" had been chosen umpire. "Perhaps his honor would plaze to come and look at the bit of land at once, and see for himself how badly O'Rorke was conducting himself."

The master said, "Yes, he would. It is but a few steps;" and evidently he took it for granted that Ethel would come too.

But the young lady had other designs. "I am going the other way," she said, "by the Widow Moore's house. Don't mind me, Mr. O'Neil. I promised the old woman that I would go to see her to-day. And she is very ill,—dying, indeed, I believe."

"But you can go there afterwards: there is plenty of time. By the way, no, I forgot. You must not go to that cottage, Miss Mildmay. The old woman's son has just come home, and he is in fever. Dr. O'Toole told me so this morning."

He did not mean it of course; but in that "You must not," there was a shade of imperiousness, which was the tocsin to revolt.

"I am not in the least afraid of infection, and I promised to go," Miss Mildmay said; and she actually moved away.

But her guardian was by her side. "Wait till to-morrow," he said.

"The woman will be dead to-morrow; and I cannot let her die without seeing me."

"Nonsense! I know her of old: she is constantly 'going to die,' but never does die. Come, Miss Mildmay, I can't allow it. It is folly, madness."

"You can't allow it?"

"No. I will not let you expose yourself and others, too, to infection. The fever may be infectious: I am not sure. At all events, wait till to-morrow, and we can inquire."

"I tell you that she will be dead to-morrow."

Both their tempers were warming, both their wills rising. Their eyes met, as they invariably did on occasions of measurements of strength such as this."

"I ask you not to go," Mr. O'Neil said at last; said it, too, entreatingly,—almost, for him, humbly.

Ethel hesitated an instant. He loved her, and she knew it; but she had no pity for him then,—no pity when she remembered his proud, defiant resolution to win her. At all events, in this trifle he would not be the victor. She would prove to him, and force him to see, that she could resist him.

"How absurd!" and she laughed lightly. "How absurd! We are becoming tragical actually, and about what? Because, indeed, I am going to pay a visit to a dying old woman, who happens to have a sick son. Come, Mr. O'Neil, it is you who are silly with your nervous fears. Don't be afraid. Infection is all humbug to my mind; but, to satisfy you, I promise to change all my things before I go near anybody at Mount Druid."

Mr. O'Neil had, in his eagerness, laid his hand lightly upon her shoulder; now he removed it. "I have both forbidden and implored of you not to go," he said: "I can do no more."

It was evident that he was stung to the quick, incensed. There was something in his face and voice which made Ethel feel a little flurried and frightened. It is not always the moment of victory which affords the keenest delight. But she had won her victory, and was proud of it.

Indeed, the girl, as she walked with her stateliest step away, felt in quite a tumult of pride and excitement. More flushed than ever were her cheeks; more like two flaming torches her eyes. Not a suitable mood exactly for the errand of charity upon which she was bent; hardly the proper preparation for the spectacle of misery which she was so soon to witness. That death jostles life is a truism; but people do not become accustomed to things because they are truisms, and death, — strange, sad, solemn, and peaceful, — closely intwined as it is to life, will yet ever be its deepest and most thrilling mystery.

How full Ethel was of life just now! Her heart was beating high, her blood running swiftly; from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot she was tingling all over with a sense of elation and triumph. Her walk had soon quickened into a run: the fading light, the solitude and stillness, did not oppress her. She saw, indeed, and felt, nothing of them all. Within all was too great a turmoil; her brain too much excited for her to see or even be conscious of the calm external world of nature which surrounded her.

So quickly did she go, that soon, very soon, she had reached old Martha Moore's house. House! Was this thing a house, — a shelter for human beings with souls? The girl, accustomed as she was by this time to the miserable hovels of the Irish peasantry, paused with a shrinking at her heart, with a sudden cold shiver from head to foot, when she came face to face with the sight that greeted her from its threshold. What a picture it was! what a weird, uncanny picture in that uncertain, fading light! A mud-floored hovel, lower than the level of the road, with pools of water here and there, in which the sickly glare of a single tallow-candle was reflected. On the grimy, filthy walls a few cheap prints were hanging. A pig was grunting in one corner; a brood of young chickens fluttering in the other. One chair and one table the only furniture. There was a bed, to be sure; but such a bed! — a sort of hole

made in the wall, lined with some dirty boards, and covered with some dark-brown stuff. Above it hung a brass crucifix and a bunch of palms; and on it lay a fine, stalwart young man, writhing, as Ethel's first glance told her, in fever; his hard brown hands clutching the coverlet, his eyes wild, his lips uttering disjointed, ravaging sentences. The girl was frightened now, shocked and startled, and would willingly have drawn back; but it was too late. An old woman sitting on the floor hugging her knees, and wailing piteously as she rocked herself to and fro, looked up as her figure darkened the doorway, and made a sign for her to enter.

"Ah, is it you, honey? — you yourself at last? God bless your pretty face! So you have come to see the craythur die, have ye? God bless ye! God bless ye!"

It was the sick man's mother. Mr. O'Neil had been right. Yesterday priest and doctor had given her up, wishing her Godspeed upon her journey; but the old woman had changed her mind, and turned back again, waiting to watch the child she had borne go safely before her.

"There was not room for them both to die together," she said; "and he must have the bed."

She had had many children, and this was the last; and now he, a sailor, sick to death with a fierce fever which he had caught on board ship, had just come home to her to die too. And Martha, with her seventy years, had a stout heart still, and would not leave him out in the cold behind her.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

COME in, honey dear. You'll come in, won't ye?" old Martha inquired, as Ethel stood looking and hesitating. And the little group round the sick man — two or three charitable neighbors, and the rough, kindly country-priest, faithfully striving to help the poor sailor on his last and longest journey — moved, and made room for her to join them.

"And will he really die, Martha?" Ethel asked with a shudder, as she came and knelt by the old woman's side.

"Sure enough, sure enough! We'll wake him to-night, honey. He'll be cold and stiff to-night, as sure as he's my last-born boy." And she took to her rocking and wailing again.

But indeed Ethel could see for herself.

Death was already in the young man's face; his hands were relaxing their tight, painful clutch; his eyes were growing dim; exhaustion was stealing over him. It was easy to see that the battle was nearly fought out, and that peace and repose were at hand.

What a strange, heart-rending scene it was! How mournfully mysterious and weird it all looked in the yellow flare of a single tallow-candle, and with that pale, sickly twilight creeping in through the door! Yet it was not altogether mournful. Man's curse was upon the place; but God's smile rested there too. Poverty, misery, and death had met to hold tryst together; but other and brighter visitors were not far away. Heaven has strange compensations; and to the poor death comes as a friend to make them forget the weariness and hardships of the accomplished road, and with faith and love and fearless hope to open their dying eyes to the gladness and restfulness of the mysterious country to which they are bound.

Presently old Martha's wail ceased, and they all knelt and prayed together. Ethel prayed and wept with the rest, as a deep bush stole over the little cabin, undisturbed except by the weak moans of the sick man and the monotonous, gentle voice of the priest as he recited the prayers for the dying. Just then it was that Ethel, raising her eyes, saw Mr. O'Neil at the entrance. Unlike her, he did not seem to hesitate, but, bending his tall figure almost in two, crept in through the low opening, and came and stood in the shadow behind her. A sharp pang shot through her conscience then, as she recollected the unworthy taunt she had indulged in a few minutes ago. She had pretended to believe that he had feared for himself; and now—here was his answer! Then he had not even noticed it; but now something told her that he wished to punish her, and that this was his punishment; that he was resolved to humble her, and that this was her humiliation. And as it ever is, and ever will be so long as the world lasts, that around great tragedies minor ones must cluster, around dying-beds human hopes and passions will clash in their wild unrest; so it was that in this miserable Irish hovel, by the bedside of this poor dying sailor, these two fought out their own tiny battle, and, with death solemnly watching them, eagerly played the game of life.

It was some time before they left the cottage. When the priest had administered the last rites, the sick man had rallied, and seemed to recover some faint glimpses of consciousness. Then they left him to his mother, and, passing out from the dreadful

atmosphere of the little cabin into the delicious evening air, silently took the homeward road. No wonder that they were silent; no wonder that their hearts were too heavy for many words, and that the haunting vision of that dying scene seemed to make a great, impassable gulf of the last half-hour, in which, for the moment, all personal feelings were absorbed.

Presently, however, Mr. O'Neil spoke, very gravely and coldly. "I came to fetch you," he said, "because it is getting dark, and the road home a lonely one. Dogs are sometimes troublesome at this hour."

"Thank you." And there was silence again, to be disturbed but once more. "Mr. O'Neil," Ethel said after a long interval, "is it not terrible? Why should there be such miserable, cruel poverty as that?"

"Why indeed! God only knows. I would prevent it if I could; but I am powerless. They are my uncle's tenants. And what can I do when there are a hundred, ay, hundreds even, of similar cases."

He spoke in a tone of profound irritation and sadness; and she could see in the uncertain light that his face had suddenly become so dark and careworn that she did not venture to speak again. It was a long walk to Mount Druid, and a lonely road certainly. In her heart of hearts Ethel was intensely grateful that she had not been treated according to her deserts, and left to find her way home alone. It was dark too: the stars were already shining calmly in the dark-blue sky; but clouds were as yet hiding the pale, rising moon. Not a creature did they meet. Here and there they passed by a rare cabin, from which a faint light stole across the road, and where the angry, suspicious growl of a dog renewed her sentiments of gratitude. But no human-being was visible. Yes, there was one,—only one, —but not until they had almost reached the entrance-gate of Mount Druid; and here they did meet a solitary wanderer, a tall man in a great, heavy, dark coat, who brushed by them with a hurried step, and disappeared in the darkness. "Who is it, I wonder?" Ethel thought, with some faint curiosity; for, quickly as he had passed them, she had been able to see that his dress was not that of a peasant. But she made no remark; for her companion had apparently noticed nothing, and she did not like to be the one to again break the silence.

"Who is it, I wonder?" Ten minutes later, her idle, languid curiosity was more than satisfied.

She was still out. Mr. O'Neil had entered the house; but at this time of year the hour before dinner was a favorite one

of Ethel's. She was fond of watching the stars as they came out one by one, and of seeing the moon rise slowly, and of hearing the sounds of day gradually die out. This evening, too, she was haunted with a horrible melancholy. Perhaps it was the scene which she had just witnessed which hung like a pall over her heart; perhaps it was that she was aware that she had grieved and offended her guardian, and that she was sorry for it; or perhaps sad omens were flying about through the soft night winds. At all events, she was wretched. What she felt she did not exactly know then, being completely unable to analyze her sensations; but afterwards she remembered and understood it all, and knew that she had felt as people do feel who have been sheltered for a while in a safe and pleasant harbor, but for whom the hour has struck to wander forth into the stormy, dreary wastes again.

And so this vague, indefinite sense of discomfort and coming sorrow was upon her. And yet her thoughts were perhaps just then rather tender ones than sorrowful. She was thinking, as it chanced, of that other evening in the villa garden at Nice, when Count O'Neil had suddenly solved the miserable question which was racking her brain, and had extracted from her the promise that she would for his sake leave her father's house the very next day. She had believed that she had hated him for it, that she must hate him forever; and when the report of his marriage had come to her ears a year ago, she had worse than hated him, — she had despised him. But that report had been contradicted, — contradicted by facts. He was not married yet at all events. In deed at least, if not in thought, he was faithful to her, — more faithful perhaps than she had been to him —

Oh! what was this, — who, rather, was this hastening towards her up the avenue, across which the uncertain moonlight was throwing through the trees strange, waving shadows?

Suddenly Ethel stood quite still. She knew at once who it was, though he was not near her yet, though she had believed him thousands of miles away, and though the heavy great-coat which he wore magnified his figure into an almost complete disguise. She knew him at once; and with a sudden, strange calmness, she stood still and waited.

What do people do or feel or say in such moments as these? Ethel, for her part, did or said nothing; but she felt that the world was swimming under her feet, that the trees were all falling around her, that

the starlit sky was coming down with a rush on top of her; and she let Count O'Neil come to her and take her hand, and peer down into her face, and call her name over and over again.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle! Is it you really, — you yourself? Ethel, dearest Ethel, will you not speak to me, look at me?"

She could not speak; she could not look, — or rather she could look, doubting her eyes. At last a few strangled words came, —

"You frightened me, — oh, so much!" she said.

"Frightened you! Mademoiselle, forgive me, forgive me. But I have been waiting for hours; and, when I caught sight of you alone at last, I could not restrain myself a moment longer. I know of old that you love a moonlight stroll, mademoiselle; and so I watched and waited still, and now I am recompensed. Ah, Ethel! you have not forgotten, surely you have not forgotten, the Villa Balbi garden, and the sweet and precious moments we have passed there together?"

Forgotten it! No, indeed, she had not. But somehow he would have done better not to remind her of it.

"I am very glad to see you, Count O'Neil," she said in a low voice; and gently, but firmly, she disengaged her hand from his clasp.

"Ethel!"

"Yes, very; but" —

And, free now, she drew back a few paces, and stood facing him with courage in her eyes.

"It was not right for you to be there. It is not right for you to be here," she said.

"Ethel! mademoiselle!" and he caught her two hands again, and would not let them go. "You must, you shall, listen to me."

He was not a shy nor diffident man to be rebuffed in such a cavalierish fashion as this; and he was roused and angry, indeed in a towering passion now. Ethel did listen to him because she could not help it; because, in truth, he held her a fast and close prisoner: besides, as we know, the young man possessed the gift of eloquence and the power of persuasion. Perhaps the girl, perplexed, curious, miserable, distracted, was not at heart so sorry to be forced to stand still and hear him out.

If there be one position in the world more utterly bewildering and upsetting than another, it is that in which we find ourselves placed, when, being under the impression that we have deep and serious

grievances against a certain person, we suddenly discover that that person considers himself the aggrieved party, and that to him, and not to us, apologies and explanations are due. And this was the position in which Ethel found herself then. The young man's defence was an accusation. His explanations were severe reproaches. He had loved her, and did still, as she well knew, love her. If for eighteen months he had been silent, was it not because he well knew that those with whom she lived were his bitter enemies; and that his letters would be, as his first ones were, returned unanswered; that every attempt to see her would be frustrated?

Was it not she who had behaved harshly, cruelly even, in not having granted him even a single parting interview; in having left Nice, or at least allowed herself to be brought away,—for he could not believe that she had acted of her own free will,—without deigning to give him a word or a sign? Had he not watched and waited for one? Had he not implored of her to see him or write to him? Had he not waited patiently for these long eighteen months, counting each weary day as it slowly passed, knowing, miserably knowing, under whose influence she was; knowing how her ears would be poisoned against him, and her affection treacherously stolen from him? Had he not,—and now, indeed, was the climax reached,—had he not, he asked her, spent hours this very day, skulking and hiding about this miserable, accursed, *triste, accablant* country, in the hope of catching sight of a flutter of her dress, or hearing the blessed sound of her footstep? And she,—what had she done, what was she doing, but treating him as if he were a half-forgotten stranger, some chance acquaintance whom she had met years ago? No, not even that; for to a mere acquaintance common politeness would make her at least kind and courteous. And, at this point, the young man's voice faltered, and he threw her hands from him, and crossed his arms upon his breast in the well-remembered theatrical attitude of old.

Ethel listened to it all with a swimming, whirling brain. She was taken aback, dumfounded. This sudden volley simply took away her breath, and drove every clear idea clean out of her head.

"But—but—where is the meaning of it all?—the use, the object?" she said at last with a kind of despair.

"The meaning, the object. Mademoiselle, you ask me? You can ask me. So long as you were by your father's will under my uncle's guardianship, it was, it

is, I know, perfectly useless, hopeless, for me to claim the fulfilment of your promise to me. But, by your father's will, so soon as you are of age you are free,—free to choose your own husband. Ethel, I have counted the days, the hours. It wants but eight or nine weeks now to the first day of the new year."

She made no reply, but stood there quite motionless, staring at him with wide-opened, perplexed, slightly frightened eyes. They were silent. Suddenly there came across the evening air from the house the faint yet clear sound of the Mount Druid dressing-bell,—a happy, pleasant, peaceful sound; but to Ethel it seemed just then a sort of knell.

"I must go," she said, offering him her hand, and then she looked at him with a faint smile. "You hear that: it is the dinner-bell. I wish—I am sorry that I cannot ask you in."

The young man laughed as he took possession of her hand once more. It must have been her sudden gentleness which magically appeased him.

"So am I sorry," he said; "for, I avow it to you, I am hungry,—hungry with the hunger of a wolf. For my part I am, as ever, devoid of prejudice, and would gladly partake of my uncle's hospitality, were he polite enough to offer it; but of course it is impossible,—quite impossible. Courage! One can yet hold out a little longer."

It was a sudden and ludicrous anti-climax. A minute ago they were upon the exalted heights of romance, now upon the hideous plains of the bread-and-butter topic and dinner. Both the young people laughed.

"It is too bad," Ethel said; "but where are you stopping? How are you to get back?"

"Where do I stay? At Castle Garvagh certainly. And how do I travel back? My Rosinante is somewhere or other tied to a tree, browsing, no doubt, happily upon some scant herbage. She is as sorry a beast as her namesake. My grand-uncle's stables are not—ahem—sustained in exactly the most magnificent style," he added ruefully.

"Good-by, Count O'Neil."

"Good-by? *au revoir*, rather. To-morrow we shall meet again."

"But how? where? How can I receive you?"

"Here; at the same hour, if you will. There are volumes, yes, volumes yet, to speak to you."

"Yes, volumes." Ethel repeated slowly; "but, Count O'Neil, come openly to the

house in broad daylight, and I will see you."

"And expose myself to insults and injuries? No, mademoiselle, it is impossible."

"You would not be insulted or injured. And yet"— And she hesitated, realizing, trying, at least, to realize, how difficult, how impossible, for her it would be to receive the young man in her guardian's house.

"Yes, it is impossible!" she cried at last. "Count O'Neil, I cannot see you again."

"You can; you must."

The bell rang again; but she struggled in vain to escape.

"You can; you must. I will not let you go till you promise. For a day or two it is absolutely necessary that our arrival in the country should remain a secret: my mother would be frantic did she think I had betrayed my presence to you; but in a day or two the whole world may know of it,—any world there is in these desolate, uninhabited, regions, that is. *Au revoir*, mademoiselle. *Au revoir!* To-morrow, then, at five o'clock."

But Ethel had torn away her hand from his, and was flying, like the wind, away.



CHAPTER XXIX.

THAT evening! — apparently so like the many pleasant happy evenings that had gone before, and yet with such a strange, sad difference, with such a mysterious, cold shadow hanging over it. For long, long afterwards, Ethel used to look back at it with a thrill of pain at her heart, which was like a discordant chord of music to a sensitive ear, — a secret, wringing, aching pain, which was born that night, and was her companion, waking and sleeping, for some time to come.

Dr. O'Toole dined at Mount Druid. It was fortunate he did; for the cheery old man's company helped to conceal the sudden depression which seemed to have stolen over at least two of the little party; and if Mr. O'Neil was unwontedly grave, and Ethel unusually silent, the old doctor's loquacious tongue and never-failing hilarity made up for all deficiencies.

It is odd how a cloud, a real dark cloud, may steal in and settle down between two people, and yet remain for a while almost imperceptible, not only to their neighbours, but also to themselves. A cloud had stolen

in between Ethel and her guardian, — a fragment, as it were, of the great, dreary, hopeless mass of clouds which had, at the first start of their acquaintanceship, so apparently irrevocably estranged them. And yet the estrangement had not been irrevocable. The clouds had lightened, and been wafted away by friendly breezes. Time and patience, and sympathy and kindness, and a gentle yet resolute determination, were their names; and beneath their warm touch one by one the clouds had melted, leaving a clear, serene, bright sky behind.

But now they were coming back again. Ethel knew it and felt it. Despairingly did she feel the old weary sickening sensation of deception and concealment creeping upon her once more. Oh, how she hated it! How she hated the memory of the cruel fashion in which deception and concealment had to her unbittered and poisoned the last days of her father's life! And now she envied, piteously, hopelessly envied those who, unlike herself, could look back to the last days of those they loved without self-reproach or self-accusation. Oh, how this evening she hated the consciousness that there was a "something" to conceal, a "something" not to mention, a "something" which prevented her looking frankly and bravely into the eyes of those around her, untortured by the stabbing recollection that she was deceiving them! Yet how could she help it? How could she disregard Count O'Neil's caution? How could she be so utterly false and faithless to her old friends, as in such a trifle as this — a mere delay of a day or two — not to keep silence, and betray a secret which she believed she had hardly the right to consider her own!

And so she was silent; so grave and silent and pale, that Dr. O'Toole noticed it at last, and grew curious; and when his inquiries were put off by the never-failing, convenient plea, "a headache," gave one of his slyest, broadest, most awful winks, and nudged his old friend.

"What have you been doing with that young spark Redfern, Mrs. O'Neil?" he inquired. "Queer things are said in the country, I can tell you. He's bolted, you know, — gone like a shot. And as to her ladyship" (Dr. O'Toole always called Mrs. Redfern her ladyship), "I thought she'd eat me up alive to-day when I just dropped her a hint that perhaps he had been shot through the heart."

And the old man guffawed over the stale little joke with the keenest enjoyment.

Mrs. O'Neil reddened and groaned.

"Don't speak of it, doctor; don't speak of it. It makes me ill."

And she gave Ethel a terrible glance,—a punishment which, however, that young lady received with the most complete composure.

"He's gone to the Highlands, I believe," pursued the doctor. "A fine place for mending broken bones and other injured parts. Her ladyship gave me a list a yard long of all the 'nobs'—Charlie my darling' is meeting, —Lady Adelgiza this and Lady Belinda t'other. All the grand names took my breath away: so they did. And I hear that 'Charlie my darling' is very much admired," he added, wisely malicious.

"Is he indeed? Do you hear that, child?"

"By my word, yes. Lady Belinda is setting her cap at him like mad, and her ladyship is strutting about like a peacock already. Coming events, you know, throw their shadows before them."

"I don't believe it," Mrs. O'Neil said, drawing herself up, and sniffing the air. "Let's have our game of draughts, doctor. These two people here are in the blues, and there's no good to be got out of them."

Out came the draught-board; and the doctor and Mrs. O'Neil at least were happy. What a countless number of games those two white heads had bobbed over! Of what amicable wrangles, and mimic battles, and comic disputes, had that draught-board been the theatre between the faithful old friends! And, oh, what a sweet, pretty, tender thing, true and faithful friendship is! watering, as it does, the arid, barren plains of life with a magical water, laying the dust, levelling the rocks, making the hard, weary roads easy, and dropping everywhere the seeds of beautiful fragrant flowers, which death itself cannot kill.

When the doctor and Mrs. O'Neil played draughts, it not seldom happened that Mr. O'Neil and Ethel played chess. Half expectantly the girl stood this evening waiting for the accustomed invitation. It did not come, however. Hardly had Mr. O'Neil addressed a single word to her all through it; and now he had taken up a book, and did not even look at her. It is one thing to feel penitent and contrite for having behaved badly when one knows one is forgiven and liked as well as before, and quite another to submit humbly to the just consequences of one's misbehavior. Straightway Miss Mildmay felt huffed and aggrieved, and marched off to the piano to play her ill-humor and her sadness, and her perplexity and her troubles, into tune again. It would not do, however. Noth-

ing but sad airs would come into her head; nothing but funeral-marches, and dreary minor chords, and snatches and odds and ends of melancholy little pieces.

"God bless me!" Mrs. O'Neil said at last, looking up from her game. "What on earth are you at, child? That's the fourth funeral-march you have played since you began."

"She is thinking of a wedding," observed the doctor solemnly. "Those things always go by contraries. How many magpies did you see to-day, Miss Ethel?"

"One, doctor." And she closed the piano with one of her quick, impetuous movements, and came over to the table to watch the game.

"Nonsense!" said the doctor. "You saw three, as sure as my name is John O'Toole."

"You did not really see one magpie, child?" Mrs. O'Neil inquired, peering at her anxiously; for Mrs. O'Neil was superstitious, and firmly believed in omens.

"One for sorrow, two for joy," began Ethel, laughing.

"Three for a wedding," put in the doctor slyly: "eh, Miss Ethel! We're getting impatient, I can tell you. You're keeping us waiting too long."

Ethel laughed saucily. "You don't deal in husbands in this part of the world, doctor; and weddings without husbands are, you see, matters of difficulty."

"A smart girl like you knows how to pick up a husband wherever she goes, Miss Ethel. By the way, talking of weddings puts me in mind of funerals," proceeded the doctor. "Poor Dan Moore, old Martha's son, is in a bad way, do you know, Mrs. O'Neil? They'll be burying him to-morrow or after."

"Is it possible? That fine young fellow just come home! What is the matter with him, doctor?"

"Fever; and he is dead, or as good as dead, by this."

"Fever?" cried the old lady, horrifed. "Fever, did you say? Doctor, what sort of fever? Is it infectious?"

"Typhus. Bad kind too. Yes, it is infectious; and I wanted to warn you not to be allowing the servants about the place. There are two or three bad cases in the parish."

"Typhus! Bless my soul!" cried Mrs. O'Neil; for the dread of infection was one of her most favorite hobbies.

But the doctor re-assured her. "Never fear, never fear," he said. "Old people like you and me are safe enough: it's only the young people that"—

"Young people! Do you hear that, child? And you who are always poking your nose into those poor wretches' filthy cabins! Ethel, I positively forbid you to put your foot inside—Lord, bless me! to go near any of those poor people's hovels again until Dr. O'Toole gives you leave," she commanded with great severity. "Promise me, child. Won't you promise me?"

Ethel glanced at her guardian; but his eyes were fixed on his book.

"But," she began hesitatingly.

"Of course she promises," said the doctor decidedly. "Nobody in his senses would think of such a thing. There is Arthur there, who is born to catch fevers, as I am always telling him. Do you hear, O'Neil? Look sharp, and don't go out of your way to catch one,—if you can help it, that is. Some people have a peculiar knack for that sort of thing. Pooh, pooh!" laughing at his old friend's miserable face. "There's nothing in the world to be afraid of. Drop a hint to the servants; that is all. Lord bless me! how late it is! Good-night, good-night!" And with a bolt and a bound Dr. O'Toole had departed.

And departed, too, was poor Mrs. O'Neil's peace of mind. The vaguest, faintest rumor of the vicinity of an infectious illness was enough to upset her for a month.

"We had better leave the place at once," she decided. "To-morrow, the day after, at the latest. Arthur, don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do not, mother. What is it all about?"

"How tiresome you are! There is fever, malignant typhus-fever, in the parish. What do you think of that?" she demanded.

"Poor wretches!" Mr. O'Neil said compassionately. "I know it, mother; but there are only a few cases."

"Few or many, I am miserable, thoroughly miserable," the old lady asserted. "And here's this child here, that won't even promise me not to keep away from the cabins," she went on plaintively. "I shall die of fright: I know I shall."

"That is foolish of Miss Mildmay," Mr. O'Neil said, returning to his book.

"I did not refuse to promise, Mrs. O'Neil. I—yes, I do promise," Ethel said with sudden eagerness.

The old lady was somewhat appeased and quieted. "Good child, good child!" she said. "And I'll make a rule that every servant found within half a mile of a cabin will have to pay a fine," she exclaimed, delighted at the sudden idea. "We'll be tol-

erably safe then, I think; and the money will go to the poor sick people. Is not that a good notion, Arthur? I will consult with Flaherty about it this very evening."

Poor Mrs. O'Neil! On that night, at all events, she went to bed happy,—at least, tolerably happy,—having, with the assistance of her faithful Flaherty, laid down a complete plan of campaign against the approaches of the much-dreaded enemy, little suspecting—poor old lady!—that she was campaigning against a phantom foe. Too late, too late! The real foe had already treacherously stolen in, was indeed sitting by her side in the very midst of her bright, secure home. Nobody saw it as yet; but, invisible as it was, its grim, cold shadow was there.

The next morning, Ethel came down to breakfast very late and rather nervous. How would she and her guardian meet? The night had brought her counsel; and she had almost, if not quite, made up her mind that she was more bound to inform her guardian of the strange meeting of the past evening than to respect Count O'Neil's desire for secrecy. It was half a relief, half a disappointment, to her to find that the meal was, after all, to be a solitary one. Mr. O'Neil had, the servant informed her, breakfasted an hour ago, and had gone out to ride. It was a little odd. Ethel felt curious, and perhaps a shade uneasy. Then she was provoked with herself for feeling either curious or uneasy. Yet how could she help it? How on earth could she prevent her sensations? Ah, it was the weary, weary, wretched work beginning all over again,—the work that sickened her heart, that revolted her soul; the vague dreads, the wretched haunting fears, the horrible consciousness of concealment and mystery.

Needless dreads and fears! Needless, foolish curiosity and uneasiness! Presently, when she went up to pay her morning visit to Mrs. O'Neil, the old lady explained it all to her in the simplest manner possible.

"Arthur had not slept very well," she told her; "and so, to freshen himself up, he had gone out for a breath of air. He was quite well,—as well as possible," she said emphatically. "But he had drunk three cups of strong tea last night, and of course he could not sleep: no, of course not." And she bobbed her pretty white muslin night-cap and its pink bows with quite a satisfied air.

Ethel was satisfied too, though she looked a little grave and thoughtful. "He did not sleep well, perhaps, because I dis-

pleased him," she thought; "and perhaps he is a little displeased with me still; and perhaps just now when I meet him,—I wonder, if I told him that I was sorry, and asked him to forgive me,—I wonder what he would say."

But she was so amazed at the idea herself, that she could not come to the faintest conclusions on the subject.

"By the way, Arthur was in here this morning; and he told me to give you these, child," Mrs. O'Neil said, breaking in upon her meditations, and speaking in a slightly nervous, flurried tone of voice. "They are those letters, you know, that we have spoken to you about; and he wishes you to read them."

Ethel drew back. "Oh, no! oh, no!" she said.

Mrs. O'Neil looked at her amazed. The girl's face had suddenly crimsoned.

"Why not, child? why not? What on earth is the matter? My goodness! they won't burn you," as Ethel let the little packet of letters which she tried to force into her hand drop upon the bed.

"I don't want them. I would rather not read them. I"— Yet she looked a little curious, a little longing.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. O'Neil impatiently. "Take them, at all events, and read them or not as you please. I must say," and she drew herself up, "that I think you might oblige Arthur in such a trifling as that; and since he wishes you to read them, and to see for yourself that what we have told you all along is true as gospel, you might as well do so. I do think," she concluded in an aggrieved tone, "that, considering the eagerness with which you used to listen to every thing that was said against us, you might at least take the trouble to begin to show a little interest in our side of the question."

It was a long and flurried speech, and it was not difficult to perceive that the old lady was in one of her buffy, irritable moods this morning, and that it would not be wise to annoy her.

"That is not fair. I do take an interest. I wish—oh, how I wish!"—

But, instead of saying what it was that she did wish, Ethel took the letters, and put them in her pocket. "Whether I read them or not," she thought, "I will myself return them to Mr. O'Neil, and that will give me an opportunity of speaking to him." And in her little mind she quickly arranged that this convenient excuse would admirably pave the way to the explanation and reconciliation which she was contemplating.

"Take care of them, and don't let them out of your sight for a minute," Mrs. O'Neil warned her. "I'm always miserable when they are in my hands. They are more precious than any thing else in the world to Arthur. Well, Flaherty, what is the matter?" as that personage made her appearance wearing her longest and most important face.

"Nothing, ma'am, nothing; only I have just heard that Dan Moore, the widow's son, is dead. He went off at twelve o'clock last night."

Now, it so happened that Flaherty herself was rather partial to deaths, and never failed to announce them with a certain decent, subdued cheerfulness. But upon her mistress, on the contrary, they invariably produced the most mournful impressions; and, indeed, gloomy intelligence of any sort was excessively distasteful to her.

"Dead!" she repeated. And Ethel too exclaimed, "Dead!"

It was expected news to both of them, yet came with a sharp, unpleasant shock, such as the ruthless cutting-off of young, strong lives must ever produce.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" And Mrs. O'Neil's tender eyes were filled with kindly tears.

"Yes, ma'am, dead; and more's the pity. And I hear talk below stairs," added Flaherty, lowering her voice mysteriously, "of some of the servants wanting to slip off to-night to go to the wake."

"To go to the wake! God bless my soul! Do they want to murder us all in cold blood—in typhus-fever, I mean?"

And, needless to say, consternation, terror, and indignation took, on the spot, wild possession of the old lady's mind, and effectually dislodged every other thought from it.

In the midst of the tumult, Ethel escaped. She wanted to read the letters; and yet she could not make up her mind to do so. In the present state of things it almost seemed a sort of dishonesty, a not quite fair and upright proceeding. At all events, she would wait until she had seen her guardian; and the morning went by in a torturing, miserable state of indecision. At luncheon she would meet him; and, after luncheon, there might be an opportunity of speaking to him. But luncheon was eaten, and still he did not appear.

"His ride had fatigued him; and he was busy writing letters in his room," Mrs. O'Neil told her.

And to his room his lunch was sent. But Ethel, presently passing by the door, saw the tray with the untasted food carried.

out, and could only suppose that her guardian was too tired even to eat.

It was a dreary day,—the first dreary day for a long, long time. A break had come in the fine weather, and gloom and grayness had taken the place of sunshine and brightness,—gloom and grayness within as well as without; for through the house there reigned an unwonted stillness, that strange, causeless, mysterious sort of quiet which sometimes comes upon a place, nobody knows why, nobody can say whence. Ethel spent the afternoon alone in the library, which looked unfamiliar and melancholy in its unusual solitude; for Mrs. O'Neil's sofa remained unoccupied, and Mr. O'Neil did not once come near it. There was no inducement to go out; yet it was dull and lonely within. First the girl felt sad, then a little aggrieved and angry, then sad once more. What did it mean? Why was she left alone? Why did Mr. O'Neil so evidently avoid her? for that he was avoiding her, and resenting and wishing to punish her yesterday's conduct, she never doubted. Why was it all? Why, too, was it, that, when the clock on the mantelpiece struck four, she started and colored and trembled, and suddenly recollected that probably at this very moment Count O'Neil was taking that long, bleak, dreary ride over from Castle Garvagh to see her.

Count O'Neil! But was he really Count O'Neil? Was he really the man he called himself? Could she have made such a mistake?—could she have made such an egregious mistake? Could she, Ethel Mildmay, have once promised to become the wife of a vulgar, audacious impostor? All at once she remembered his handsome face, his ardent eyes, his convincing eloquence, his gentleness, his tenderness,—all the qualities which, in spite of the slightly comic foreign peculiarities of his character and manner, had once attracted and charmed her, and perhaps did attract and charm her still. All at once she felt a great, irresistible longing once for all to be done with these cruel doubts, these intolerable perplexities,—once for all to see, to know, the truth,—once for all,—and then at last Ethel took the little packet of letters which Mrs. O'Neil had given her that morning out of her pocket, and sat down to read them.

An hour passed, and more. The light of the autumn afternoon was fading fast away, and still she was reading on. Yet the letters, as we know, were few; but they were written in small, minute writing, hard to decipher; and time had dimmed the ink, and made the words faint and the

paper yellow. But before she rose from her seat she had made out every single word, and read it over and over again, and thought upon it; and then she looked at the clock again, and saw that it was half-past five; saw, too, that darkness was fast setting in, and that not a moment was to be lost in further hesitation. So much the better. Ethel, as we know, hated indecision with a mortal hatred, and had, by this time, pretty well accustomed herself to taking leaps in the dark. Out she went now into the fast-growing darkness, with a resolute light in her eyes, and a set determination at her heart, stumbling over Max, who was lying in inconsolable solitude upon the doorsteps, as she did so.

Poor Max had had a dull, lonely day of it, too, and hailed her advent with a joyous bark,—joy which was, however, very quickly disturbed; for at the moment the sudden appearance of a strange dark figure, coming hastily up to the door, made the dog prick his ears, and growl a not very hearty welcome.

"An old friend!" exclaimed Count O'Neil's gay, pleasant voice. "I remember thee well, thou great, awkward brute, and what mischief thy clumsiness did work upon a certain fair lady's pretty toilet. Mademoiselle, have you ever been able to forgive the dog?"

"Forgive him? I should think so! Max and I love one another now. Come, Max, come, behave yourself." As the dog continued his low, suspicious growl, and began to look dangerous, the young people had already turned away, and had entered a side-path which thick verdure concealed from the house. But the dog did not follow. There he sat on the doorsteps, with a disturbed look in his face,—a picture, indeed, of displeasure and distrust. Ethel paused, and looked back. "Come, Max," she called again.

In vain: he never stirred.

Ethel laughed nervously. "Max has not forgotten or forgiven, at all events," she said. "He does not like you."

"So be it," and the young man shrugged his shoulders with careless gayety. "Let the poor brute indulge his antipathy in peace. For my part, I cannot comprehend such unchristian sentiments; but doubtless he takes after his master, who probably loves God, and hates his neighbor; viz., me. Well, so be it. I am unprejudiced enough to believe that there are several roads which lead to heaven."

"Mr. O'Neil does not hate you. And yet"—

"On my word of honor I believe I went

very near to hating him just now, while waiting for you, mademoiselle, in this cold, deathlike, damp gloom, which chills and penetrates the very marrow of one's bones. Heavens! What a climate! what a country it is!" And he groaned and shuddered. "Mademoiselle, five minutes ago I was picturing to myself the interior of yonder house. Doubtless a bright, elegant room, with one of your splendid blazing fires. Around it, probably, you were all sitting, — a charming, tender family group, — you, my stern handsome uncle, and his eminently respectable and venerable mother, and I here outside, shivering, swearing, perhaps even laying the seeds of some incurable malady which will bring me to an early grave, and thus, in a romantic but unpleasant fashion, extinguish many difficulties. *Peste!* I put it to you, mademoiselle, am I to be blamed for some passing sentiments of hatred under the circumstances?"

"The picture is not very like the original; at least, the first part of it," Ethel said with a dreary little laugh. "But — but why did you come, then?" she asked suddenly.

"Why did I come, mademoiselle? Because I love you well enough to go to the very ends of the earth for your sake."

His voice and manner had all at once become transformed: they were tender, earnest, grave.

"Don't say that! You must not: it is not right," Ethel broke out passionately. "And it is not true, either. I know it is not. Why, a few months after we parted at Nice, you were already admiring — Your name had already been coupled with that of another girl."

The young man smiled; and perhaps it was as well for him that his companion could not see how secure and triumphant the smile was. If he had needed encouragement, surely here it was. If Ethel's strange coldness and reserve had vaguely disturbed him, was he not now re-assured? His *naïve* vanity and self-confidence were, if they had failed him for an instant, rampant once more, fanned into a merry blaze by this delightful little outburst of feminine jealousy. And, of course, he denied it all with vehement eloquence, with solemn protestations, which it would have been difficult to disbelieve.

It was true, he acknowledged, that there had been some project of marriage for him. Mothers are not their children; and his mother had thought of and wished for such a marriage. It would have been an advantageous one, no doubt; for the young lady was rich and noble. Her parents had made the first advances; and Mademoiselle

Eulalie herself had been not quite averse." And the young man paused with a deprecating little laugh, and twirled his black mustache.

"What can a man do under the circumstances?" he inquired in a tone of dolorous modesty, "but" —

"But oblige his friends. Ah! so it was true after all, count?" and Ethel laughed a little scornfully.

"No, it was not. By Heaven it was not!"

He had never by word or sign consented. He had always been constant to his one and only love. Others had planned and schemed; but he had openly protested. He had never, even for a moment, wavered or faltered in his fidelity. Even if his affection (which he swore never had), — but even if it had grown cold or faint, chilled, as it might so easily have been, by her unkindness and harshness, he had always considered himself bound — bound in honor to her. Of course he was bound. They were both bound. Such promises, such vows, as theirs, could never be broken. They were irrevocable, eternal.

Poor Ethel! She listened to it all, dazed and bewildered. He spoke so vehemently, so impetuously, so quickly, that the girl's breath was fairly taken away. Her perplexed silence gave him fresh courage, new eloquence. He began it all over again. But at last she found words to interrupt him.

"I can — I will never marry you!" she cried out suddenly in a clear, sharp, frightened tone, which rang through the damp, silent air, almost like a cry for help.

CHAPTER XXX.

THERE was a pause, — a deep, breathless pause. Both had stopped in their walk, and had turned round, facing one another. To Ethel the worst was over; but to her companion it was only the beginning of the end.

"What — what do you mean?" he faltered.

Ethel tried to speak collectedly and calmly. "I told you that I never would be your wife, at the time of papa's death," she said. "It is not my fault if you did not believe me."

"I did not believe you. I do not now."

"You must. It was true. It is true as there is a heaven above us."

"I begin to doubt heaven itself," broke

out the young man indignantly. "Ethel, you are jesting, cruelly jesting."

"Jesting!" And her voice was as sad and broken as his own. They were walking on again now. Perhaps they hardly knew, neither of them, what they were doing. Suddenly Ethel said, "Count — Count, I can't say it. How can I?" she cried; and she caught his arm, and made him stop. "Stand here, where I can see you. Let me look at your face."

The young man, amazed and bewildered, obeyed. They had reached an open spot upon which a pale moon was faintly gleaming. But, pale as the light was, it sufficed Ethel's purpose; and her companion's face was distinctly visible.

"Hear me," she said then, — "hear me. This very day, not an hour since, I have seen proofs — proofs that I cannot, cannot doubt — that you" — her voice fell almost to a whisper, and she hesitated painfully, — "that you have no right to the name of O'Neil," she said at last with a desperate effort.

It was a terrible moment. Ethel felt that it was too terrible, too painful, to last. Yet, intensely painful as it was, a horrible load seemed to be lifted from her heart. Whatever, whoever, the young man before her was, he was perhaps the dupe of others; but he himself was no deceiver. Her heart was wrung. With all its faults, it was a tender and noble heart; and she could not bear to see the pain she was inflicting. Selfishly she had thought but of her own gratification, of her own great longing to know the truth, and she had forgotten to weigh the cruelty of the blow till it had been already dealt. It seemed to have stunned her companion.

"What do you mean? What do you say?" he inquired at last, in a helpless, feeble sort of way. "Explain yourself; for Heaven's sake, explain yourself, mademoiselle."

Explain! How could she? "Forgive me," was all that she was able to say, — "forgive me. But I thought it better, kinder, to tell you the truth myself, than to let you hear it through others."

"Better! kinder!" he repeated indignantly. "A strange kindness truly! A very perfect charity! You call it kindness, mademoiselle, to insult me, — to tell me to my face that I am a liar, an impostor. To — Heavens! It is beyond man's patience to bear." And he broke down with a strangled sob.

"Oh, no! not you; not you. I know that you are innocent. But your mo— Madame O'Neil."

He started as though he were stung.

"My mother's honor is my own. Be silent, mademoiselle!"

Ethel was silent, clasping her hands tightly, completely bewildered by this hopeless entanglement.

"Yes," he went on vehemently: "my mother's honor is my own; and even by you, — even by you, mademoiselle, — I will not permit it to be attacked. You talked of proofs just now. What proofs? Whatever they are, they are false, — false as hell."

"Perhaps so, — perhaps they are. Oh, no! they are true."

"False as hell!" he went on without heeding, or perhaps even hearing her. "There can be no proofs. How could it be proved that I am not myself, — that I am not my own mother's son? Bah! What a fool, what an idiot, I am to be even startled! But no wonder, — no wonder that such a stab, coming from you, pierces my heart through and through."

"Forgive me. At least, forgive me."

"Call me O'Neil, — Ernest O'Neil."

Ethel turned away. "I cannot. Oh, I cannot!"

With a quick, sharp movement, he, too, turned as if to leave her. But restraint and reserve were unknown to him; and the storm must break loose. White and cold as marble, with bowed head, and trembling from head to foot, she listened to all his reproaches. She had accused him of infidelity, and who was unfaithful? She had suspected him of inconstancy, but who had proved herself inconstancy itself? For that was the secret of it all. He was not blind nor a fool; and at last he saw the truth, — the truth of which others had in vain tried to persuade him, while to her alone it had been left to succeed. It was she who was fickle and false; she who deceived; she who — "Yes, you are fickle and capricious," he broke out passionately. "But you cannot deceive me longer. I know now, what the whole world knows already, that, if you have ceased to love me, it is because you have been taught — wisely and well taught — to love my uncle."

This was too much. Ethel flamed up. "That is untrue," she said sharply.

"Untrue?"

"Yes, untrue!"

"Then you do not love him nor me, — neither of us?"

"Neither of you," she repeated. But she was asking her own question instead of replying to his. "God help me!" she said with a frightened little sob. "What can I do?"

Perhaps the young man's angry jealousy

was disarmed : at all events, it was appeased. Sanguine and confident as ever, her vague, double-meaning words had already half re-assured him.

"To do," he repeated with a bitter little laugh ; "to do,—to wait for the end, I suppose. To wait and see whether your second choice is more fortunate than the first. The end cannot be very far distant now. It must be drawing near. Mademoiselle, I tell it to you in confidence : it is drawing near. My great-uncle cannot live much longer."

"I wish that he would live forever. I wish—oh, I wish that I had never known one of you!" she broke out passionately.

"He grows weaker, feebler, and more eccentric every day," he went on. "Proofs?—what proofs are you talking of? Why, Lord O'Neil himself receives me at his house as his acknowledged heir. At present, indeed, I am his mania, and he will let me hardly out of his sight. It seems that the poor old *miserable* likes young people," he added with a slightly rueful laugh ; "and if only his cellar were a little better filled, his *cuisine* a little less savage, and this climate somewhat more humane, one might perhaps, out of charity, be able to support it for some time longer. But as it is, you, you only, mademoiselle, can give me courage to— Ah! fool that I am, I had forgotten, or have I, perhaps, been merely dreaming, laboring under a hideous nightmare? Ethel, I implore of you to say that it is so; to say that"—

"What can I say? How can I eat my own words when—when they are true?"

"True!"

"But we can be friends,—friends always. Let us at least be that."

"Then you reject me?" he said, turning very white.

"Not now. Long ago I told you that I could never be your wife."

"You reject me now unconditionally?" he persisted.

"Unconditionally!"

"You know my meaning. What! when I succeed to my grand-uncle's title and property?"

Ethel bit her lips; but she laughed lightly. "I suppose I deserve the taunt," she said : "at least, you think I do; but you are mistaken. Yes, both of you are mistaken." She was looking down on the ground thoughtfully; but now she raised her eyes boldly to his.

"Listen to me," she said then. "Less than ever would I marry you then. You smile; yet it is true. I promise you here, I give you my solemn word, that I shall never

be part and parcel of this marvellous prize. I tell you that I do not care a single straw for it. One day, perhaps, I shall prove to both of you, and force you to acknowledge, how meanly and falsely you have judged me."

It was a grand, heroine-like sort of speech, but made with a certain flurriedness and excitement which deprived it of some of its impressiveness. Long ago, when she had been playing at love with this handsome young man by her side, she had often, as he knew, felt herself to be three parts a heroine, and had taken to the rôle rather kindly. But now, when she was for the first time in her life really making something like an heroic resolve, her courage was low and her heart faint. Somehow or other, this speech of hers did not seem to make much impression upon her companion. Perhaps he did not understand it. Certainly he did not believe it.

"You force me to judge you. You force me to be unkind and rude and savage," he replied. "But, hard and cruel as you are, I believe nothing but good of you,—no, nothing. You have been warped, prejudiced, imposed upon. Your love has been stolen from me, its rightful possessor. But I tell you that I do not believe it. Until you are of age, your own mistress, and perfectly free, I will"—

He paused abruptly. The girl was not even listening to him. The path they were on emerged now, within a few paces, upon the avenue; and at that moment carriage-wheels were heard, and a vehicle of some sort passed.

"It is Doctor O Toole's gig," she said in a startled tone. "He was not to have dined to-day. What can bring him at this hour?"

Her companion laughed a little sadly and bitterly. "*L'histoire se répète*," he said. "It seems that we two are destined to be always playing at hide-and-go-seek. Often do I recollect that evening at Nice, when my respected uncle stalked past us upon the avenue, pretending not to see us. But he did see us, I would stake a hundred louis. He—Lord! what a century is this, that a pretext cannot be found that we should fight one another like honest men, and let the best man live in peace. For my part, I am weary of life on these terms."

"So am I. This cannot go on. I came to say good-by, and now I say it."

"You do not—you must not—you"— And he caught hold of her hand, and would not let it go.

She stood for half a minute or so passive; then with a strange quiet, "At least, prove yourself a gentleman," she said.

And then at last her hand was dropped as though its touch burned him, and she was free to go.

She went quietly at first, and then more quickly. Soon she had reached the house, and entered it, dazed and dazzled by the sudden warmth and brightness.

Dr. O'Toole's gig was at the door. He and Mrs. O'Neil were whispering together on the staircase. "Don't let Arthur guess that I sent for you," she was saying; "pretend that you just dropped in by chance. He would be angry if he thought I had dragged you out."

The doctor winked knowingly, and passed on.

"Is any thing the matter? Is Mr. O'Neil ill?" Ethel asked, with her heart in her mouth.

"Ill! not at all, child. Don't look so flabber-gasted. He has got a slight headache, that's all; but, as you know, I like to have the doctor for every prick of a pin. Bless me! Why can't you walk like a Christian by daylight, and not go out in the dark like an owl? We will have you complaining next;" and she bustled away.

So Mr. O'Neil was complaining. Moreover, his mother was cross. A bad sign. Ethel caught hold of the banisters to steady herself: she felt dizzy and faint. A long, long time she waited, what, indeed, seemed an age. Dr. O'Toole's visits were lengthy and conversational ones; and this one, to poor Ethel at least, seemed interminable. At last he came out, cheery and kindly as ever. "Nothing; it's nothing," he was assuring Mrs. O'Neil. "He'll be all right in the morning, never fear. I will send him up a sleeping-draught, and — Lord bless me! What are you standing there for, just like a ghost, Miss Ethel? It is you who will be giving us trouble unless you take care. Where are all your roses gone to?"

There was not a chance of getting a private word with the doctor. Little Mrs. O'Neil, happy again, chattered the whole way down stairs and to the hall-door with him; and Ethel, all her patient waiting gone for nothing, went to her own room at last to take off her things, and to try to persuade herself that she was not feeling uneasy.

Next morning, however, she was more fortunate. The sleeping-draught had not worked the promised effect. Mr. O'Neil was still unwell, too unwell to leave his room; and Mrs. O'Neil, her fair, pretty face dragged and anxious, was sharply reproving Ethel for looking alarmed, and Flaherty for looking mysterious.

"There is nothing the matter with him, — nothing in the world. Bless me! Don't be creeping about the house as though there was sickness in it. Can't you go and play a tune on the piano, child, just to make a noise, and to make one feel as usual? Something merry and lively, mind; none of your horrid, dreary marches," she commanded.

Ethel went and did as she was bid. Perhaps her guardian, sick and restless in his room, hearing that soft, sweet, merry, yet sadly pathetic, German valse going on in the library, thought it rather a heartless thing of the girl to be playing valses when he was feeling so wretched and ill; but, if he did, he kept the thought to himself, and said nothing about it.

Presently it ceased, breaking off suddenly in the midst; that particular valse being destined never to be finished. The doctor, issuing from the sick-room, had come in in search of pen and paper.

Ethel jumped up. "How is he, doctor? Better; is he not? Oh" — she paused, looking very white and frightened. "O doctor! what is it?"

"What is what, Miss Ethel?"

Dr. O'Toole was a little cross too; but Ethel had seen something in his face which made her completely indifferent to anybody's crossness.

"Tut, tut!" said the doctor. "Bless my soul!" for the girl had suddenly burst into tears.

"Tell me, doctor; oh, tell me that it is not the fever!" she implored.

"The fever! what fever? Hum — well, what is the use of my telling you, when — when I don't know myself yet? Tut, tut, child! 'Don't cross the bridge till you come to it.' Time enough to fret when!"

"It is the fever, I know it is; and I have killed him!"

Of course the good doctor thought she had parted with her senses, and stared at her through his spectacles with alarmed eyes; but, when the girl had poured out her confession, he understood it all, and, truth to tell, looked a little grave.

"Hum! That accounts for it, that accounts for it," he said thoughtfully. "I was puzzling my brain to know how on earth he could have picked it up."

"Then it is true. It is the fever!" Ethel cried, her last hope gone. "O doctor, if he dies, I shall have killed him!"

"Dies! stuff and nonsense, child! Who is talking of dying? Even if the man has got a touch of the nasty disease, he will get through it; of course he will. Come,

come, child ! cheer up," for the old man's heart was really touched at the girl's distress. " And sure it was not your fault either, not a bit of it. You are only a chit of a girl, without sense ; but Arthur ought to have sense, and to know better than to be putting himself in the way of infection. If I have told him so once, I have told him so a hundred times ; but, Lord bless us ! we men will be fools to the end of the chapter, I believe, when a pretty girl is in question." And, with an awful wink, Dr. O'Toole proceeded to write his prescription.

It was poor consolation ; but it was some. First of all, it was not quite sure it was the fever ; secondly, even if it were, Dr. O'Toole had said he would certainly pull through it ; and any consolation is better than none.

Quickly enough, too quickly, the time came when there was none ; when one by one Dr. O'Toole's hopeful prophecies falsified themselves ; when vague, unconfessed uneasiness grew into dire alarm and consternation ; when faces were pale, and eyes dim, and hearts sick and weary, all through the house. Oh, what a wretched, dreary time it was ! Who does not know it ? Who cannot remember some such time as this in their lives, when the lives of those they love are hanging in the balance, and in watching and waiting the long, wretched hours go by ? Mr. O'Neil was ill, — desperately ill. Even Dr. O'Toole's cheery voice faltered, and his jovial face looked strangely grave, and his courage failed him, and he declared that the responsibility was too great, and that other advice must be had. Other advice ! Who does not know the horrible sound of that anxious call for help, of that painful acknowledgment that disease and death are strong, and that man's science and man's efforts are being slowly yet surely and mysteriously baffled ?

They had all borne up pretty well till now. Mrs. O'Neil had perfect faith in Dr. O'Toole, and his confidence was the barometer of her courage. But, when that failed, the old lady collapsed all at once, and came sobbing and weeping to throw herself into Ethel's arms.

" There is a curse upon us, a curse," she cried. " O God ! what sin have I committed, that I should live to see the last of my children, the last of the O'Neils, die ? "

Ethel kissed her, and comforted her as best she could ; but she could not weep with her. Except that first day, when she had burst into that passion of tears before Dr. O'Toole, she had not wept at all ; and yet she thought that she had never, never known what unhappiness was till now.

It was a sunless day ; the wind was sighing sadly through the nearly-despoiled trees, and the falling leaves were rustling to the ground. Summer and joy seemed to have fled together, and to have left the world naked and miserable. It was pouring rain too ; yet here was the Redfern chariot toiling painfully up the rivulated avenue, and a mounted messenger from Castle Garvagh coming to inquire.

On the horrid paraphernalia of illness ! the miserable conventionalities with which the world carelessly condoles with grief, — conventionalities which, not seldom, are like so many pricks of pins into sore and bleeding hearts. Upon poor little Mrs. O'Neil's impressionable, lively nature, these common, trifling little civilities produced a new shock. Mrs. Redfern was in the carriage herself, — had come with her handsome horses and fat coachman, in spite of wind and weather ; in spite, too, of resentment and offence, pardoning injuries, as, in such great erises as these, good Christians must pardon them. And Lord O'Neil had actually sent a shaky, anxious little note, containing his best love to poor Arthur, and his best sympathy to dear Sarah in her great affliction.

" Oh, it was dreadful, — too dreadful ! Over and over again the old lady said with piteous moans, that it was too dreadful to hear. " It is a punishment on me, — a punishment on my pride, which God has never yet forgiven," she wailed, — " the pride that would not let me take Bernard's child home. It was the sin of my life ; and now Bernard's child is dead, and my own child is dying, and God is punishing me for it."

Ethel shuddered. " He will not die, Mrs. O'Neil ; he cannot."

And in truth it seemed to her that the thing was impossible ; for that, if Mr. O'Neil died, his death would be upon her conscience.

Mrs. O'Neil shook her head. " I don't know, child ; I don't know. God's ways are dark. He took old Martha's last son from her ; and now he is taking mine, — now, too, when it would seem that at last, at long last, he could have been happy ; that we could both have been happy and confident. That reminds me, child," she said, looking up through her tears, " that I gave you those letters of Bridget's the other day. Mind that you don't let them go astray."

" Oh, no ! " Ethel showed her how she had, for safety, placed them in an old-fashioned, delicately-carved Indian box, with a secret spring in it, which had been a sort of heirloom in the family for over half a

century, and which always lay upon a *console* in the corner of the library. "Will you put them up? or shall I leave them here?" the girl inquired.

"Leave them there, child. I can't bear the sight of them. What good are they now? What good will they be when Arthur— Oh, my God! is he dying? O God! are you a good God, and yet will you take him from me?"

"No, no! He will not, can not," Ethel repeated over and over again.

But, for all her hopeful words, the world seemed a blank to her in which even hope was dead.

It was that day that the great doctor came. They had hung upon his coming as drowning people cling to the last plank. But he had gone away again, leaving but faint comfort behind him. "As long as there is life, there is hope," were his parting words; but it was easy to see that he was not hopeful himself. It was easy to see—nay, impossible not to see—that Mr. O'Neil was fearfully ill,—could it be, dying? Could it be?

Ethel had sat up all through the terrible night, counting the dark hours as a miser counts his gold, as they slowly passed; for he was still alive, and the doctors thought, that, if he could only live through this awful crisis, there might be a chance of recovery. She had sat up listening to the clocks striking, and to the wild ravings of the sick man as they crept out through the half-open door, and, when dawn came at last, listening to the bird-world rousing itself, and greeting with its strangely sweet and sad songs "the earliest pipe of half-awakened birds,"—the new-born day.

What fresh, cruel, sweet songs they were! And when evening came, and, tired after their happy day, the birds would sing, again returning to their nests, would not, perhaps, a precious, well-loved life have passed away, and death be in the house?

The thought was very nearly intolerable. It would have been entirely so but for the weariness and exhaustion which so often mercifully stun the hearts and capabilities of feeling of those who live to see others die. Misery and fatigue had gone a good way towards stunning Ethel now. Some compassionate servant noticed her white, fixed face at last, and insisted upon her going to rest. The morning was chilly and raw, and the girl was shivering from head to foot. The library was the only well-warmed room in the house; for here the fire had been burning all night; and here, too, Ethel found poor Max, who, having in vain tried to effect an entry into his mas-

ter's room, had finally cried himself to sleep on the rug.

This was too much. Ethel, as we know, was not much given to tears. But at this spectacle they came,—came with a wild, blinding rush; and, throwing herself down on the floor by his side, she buried her head in her hands, and wept as if her heart would break,—wept till she could weep no longer, till her eyelids drooped from sheer exhaustion,—wept till her sobs became sighs, and her sighs dreams; till they, too, passed, and melted in a deep, dreamless sleep.

It must have lasted for hours. When she awoke, the sun was high in the heavens,—a burst of sunshine which flooded the room, and dazzled her eyes. Yet it was not this that had awoke her: it was a kiss upon her forehead,—a cold, familiar kiss, which roused her as effectually as a *douche* of icy water would have done.

Yes, she was awake,—wide awake; and there before her, standing over her, looking down at her with a smile, was Madame O'Neil.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MISS MILDMAY was, as we know, by no means deficient in that admirable quality,—presence of mind; yet she will forgive her biographer for recording, that, at this moment, she did utterly and completely lose her presence of mind; felt herself, indeed, to be a sort of helpless idiot, totally incapable of a course of action of any description. As a matter of fact, she sat upon the ground, and stared speechlessly at her unexpected visitor.

Not so Madame O'Neil, who, not taken unawares, and in full possession of all her faculties, was looking composedly about the room.

Yet even her hard, handsome face flushed faintly, and betrayed something like emotion. It was a trying moment. Years and years had passed since she had last been in that room: youth had become age, fair looks had faded, the fire of life had been quenched. And yet here she was again—the goal of her life still unattained—on the very spot where she had first dreamed that ambitious dream which long, weary, resolute waiting had not yet realized. What thoughts, what memories, must have rushed into her mind then! What a sharp pang must have pierced her heart! And yet she was calm,—pale again and smiling,

—her large, dark, resolved eyes collectively surveying it all.

And she was the first, too, to speak. "The old room," she said softly: "what a pleasure to be once more in it! — what a joy! And you, too, dear child: what a happiness to see you, too, again!"

Ethel was slowly rising from the ground. "Perhaps you wish to see Mrs. O'Neil, madame," she said; "but"—

"No, no, no! Not for all the world,—not for all the world, would I intrude upon my mother-in-law in such a cruel moment as this. Ah, hard and unjust as she has ever been to me, yet can I sympathize with her, and feel for her, in such a terrible affliction. Will he die?" she inquired suddenly, and fixing her eyes upon the young girl with a quick, penetrating glance.

Ethel turned away. "I don't know; oh! I don't know," she cried. "Perhaps he is dying,—perhaps he is dead already." And she moved as though to leave the room.

But Madame O'Neil detained her. "He is not dead," she said. "The servant told me even that there was a shade of improvement. Wait, mademoiselle!" as Ethel still seemed to wish to escape.

Perhaps it was the touch of her hand upon her shoulder, perhaps it was the sudden tone of authority, which all at once roused Ethel's spirit.

"Wait?" she repeated,—"why should I wait? Madame, what brings you here into this house, and at such a time as this?"

"True. I grant it to you. It does seem strange; but"— And Madame O'Neil smiled. "Mademoiselle, I have had the audacity to come actually to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. For the sake of old times, you know. Once you were almost my child." And she smiled.

Ethel crimsoned. "It is true, madame: at least, I believe it is true; but"—

"But the past is an embarrassing memory which it is best to dismiss. Is it so, mademoiselle?"

Her quiet, smooth tone of irony made Ethel wince. "It is a painful memory," she said in a low voice,—"painful as the memory of every folly must be."

"Folly! What a convenient word!" And she laughed lightly. "Pray, mademoiselle, why was it folly for you to love my son?"

"I did not love him, madame: you force me to tell the truth. I believe I never loved him. I"—

She paused, clasping her hands with a

gesture of despair; for Madame O'Neil's steady gaze hopelessly bewildered her.

"Never loved him!" she repeated softly, but with a low, indignant thrill. "But come," she went on in a different tone after a little pause,—"come. What has brought me here was not to reproach or quarrel with anybody. I am a woman of the world, and an old woman too; and well I know that young girls' hearts are fickle and volatile as the winds and waves, and that to expect constancy from them is to look for water in an empty pitcher. We have a proverb, '*Amour fait rage; argent fait mariage*', and I am perfectly aware that what you English girls call a flirtation—even a *very violent* one—is quite a different thing from a marriage. Therefore it is, that you should have changed your mind is not a matter of such deep surprise, not such a terrible shock, to me as to my dear son, who believes still, poor fellow, that all women—young and pretty ones at least—are angels. But, just as a matter of curiosity, why is it that you have changed your mind, mademoiselle? Surely this, at least, a mother has a right to know."

"Papa would never have," Ethel began a little hesitatingly. But Madame O'Neil interrupted her without ceremony. "Your father! Ah, another convenient excuse! Wonderful is the devotion of those children to their parents," she said with a stinging laugh. "While your father lived, mademoiselle, you feared not to deceive him and disregard his wishes. And now that he is dead, and can neither know nor care what you do, you pretend to hold these same wishes sacred. At least, mademoiselle, I thought you were frank and honest."

As usual, Madame O'Neil had only been able to hold her temper in check up to a certain point; and, as usual, her weakness gave Ethel an advantage.

"Yes, it is true: I am at least frank and honest," the young girl said, flaming up indignantly. "And, what is more, I will tell you the truth. I will never marry your—you know whom I mean. I will never marry him for two reasons: first, because I do not love him, and never did love him; and, secondly, because—yes, I will say it to your face—because he is not your son, and you know that he is not."

"Ah!" she drew a long, long breath. As to Ethel, she was trembling all over with excitement and nervousness and fear; for, bold as she was, she did fear Madame O'Neil.

"You say that deliberately?" Madame O'Neil asked quietly.

"Yes, deliberately. Let me go, madame, let me go now."

"Not yet." And she tightly held her hand. "Not yet. Why do you say it?"

"Because I know it to be true."

She expected a storm; but none came. "Poor child, poor child!" Madame O'Neil said with a gentle, pitying laugh. "Wafted here and there like a fallen leaf, now believing this, now that. Do not think I blame you; but I do feel pity for you."

"Let me go, madame."

"Now believing this, now that; now hearing one side, now the other,—no wonder that you are bewildered and perplexed. And so a bad woman's dying words, a woman whose character had been for years utterly ruined,—words that were dragged, tortured, from her, and which no one in their senses would believe; and so a *misère* such as this has produced this great revolution in you, has caused this wretched misunderstanding between us. Poor child!" And she bent down and kissed her.

That kiss was the last straw.

"No, it is not that only,—a *misère*, as you call it," she cried indignantly, and wrenching her hand away. "Madame, I am not a fool, though you pretend to think me one. There is more than that."

"More?"

"Yes, more."

Madame O'Neil's face did not grow paler (it could not do that); but a change, some sort of a change, passed across it.

"More!" she repeated. "In the name of Heaven, what do you mean?" she asked.

Quite involuntarily Ethel's eyes wandered uneasily across the room to the *console* upon which the Indian box was placed. It was a quick, hasty glance; but, quick as it was, it did not escape her companion. "I mean that proofs exist,—indubitable proofs that—Let me go," she cried, breaking off suddenly; for she felt that she was becoming paralyzed and helpless again beneath Madame O'Neil's searching eyes. "Let me go. I will tell you nothing, nothing; and, if you will not leave the room, I must. Madame, will you go, or not?"

The girl was crimson. All her momentary presence of mind, all her courage and self-restraint, had vanished. Madame O'Neil only smiled.

"Fool, little fool!" she began, slowly gathering up her shawl.

And then suddenly she paused. The door had been flung open, and a frightened servant had rushed in. "The master is mortal bad, miss," she cried; "and the mistress has fainted away; and the doctor is calling for you to come to look after her. And, O Lord! O Lord!" For Ethel

had flown past her with a little scream, and was out of hearing already.

Madame O'Neil was alone, standing perfectly still as they had left her, in the middle of the long room, pale and still and cold as marble.

Perhaps, for a moment or two, a rush of memories overpowered her; perhaps even upon her steel-like nature the moment, the place, the sight of the old familiar room, of all the old familiar objects which surrounded her, produced a strange, bewildering sensation; perhaps even into her cold, calculating heart, the thought that her husband's brother was at this very instant dying within a few yards of her shot something like a pang. But, if so, it was only momentarily—a passing weakness. Gradually and slowly her eyes raised themselves from the ground, and wandered curiously and anxiously about the room, resting here and there upon some piece of furniture or ornament or picture,—old friends which stared at her like ghosts from the dim, distant past. It was wonderfully little changed since she, a girl, had known in that very room how, humbly and dexterously, to attract the admiring glances of a weak, foolish boy, and, while befooling and deceiving his unsuspecting mother, to bind him closely to her. Here on this very spot she had sat on a lowly stool at her mistress's feet, reading aloud to her some silly French romance, and, whilst amusing his mother, had not failed to drop sweet poison into the young man's ears. There she had modestly sat bending diligently over some marvellous piece of fancy-work, yet not too engrossed, from time to time, to raise her splendid eyes in answer to some passionate, ardent glance. Ah! and this was life,—the past a silent, mocking, and empty dream; the present delusion, disappointment, defeat. But could it be defeat, with Arthur O'Neil dying, and—

Oh that wretched, tell-tale glance of Ethel's! Oh, the mad, giddy thoughtlessness of a heedless young girl! Very quietly, but with a quick, unfaltering step, Madame O'Neil did move, at last, right across the room to the *console* at the farther end of it, upon which the little Indian box was lying. She took it up in her hand, looking at it with a slow, recognizing glance. It seemed to her, somehow, to be an old acquaintance. Yet she had all but forgotten it,—entirely forgotten the secret spring which opened it. But Fortune has strange caprices and still stranger favorites. Over and over again had she favored Madame O'Neil, as, indeed, she not seldom favors those who throw themselves into

her arms ; and now, at this supreme moment, she was not going to fail her. Even as she held the box, curiously examining it, her finger touched the spring, and the lid flew open. Perhaps that really was the supreme moment of Madame O'Neil's life ; and, if so, she was equal to it. For years and years she had been haunted by this lurking dread, that her wretched tool would play her false at last, and that, in spite of all care and precaution and determination, she possessed the means to do so. It had only been a vague dread ; and over and over again she had persuaded and convinced herself that it was a foolish one. She herself had been too clever to risk such a chance, or to commit herself to any writing which could possibly inculpate her ; and so far she was secure. But she mistrusted her less clever and far less strong-minded sister ; and Mrs. Irwin had, she knew, been guilty of the folly of from time to time sending letters to America, which, unless destroyed, it was not impossible might, one day, be terrible proofs against her. But Bridget had over and over again sworn that she had destroyed them ; and Madame O'Neil had finally let the matter rest, and believed her. Yet here they were, — at least some of them ; for Bridget had so far sworn true that most of them had been destroyed. A few only — but those few all sufficient for her purpose — the clever Irishwoman had preserved. Here they were. Madame O'Neil held them in her hand ; and at once, before she had even opened the packet, a sure instinct told her what they were. She did not hesitate a moment. She did not even take the trouble of closing the door which the frightened servant had left half ajar a few minutes ago ; but at once, with swift, dexterous fingers, she undid the string which tied the papers together, and one by one examined the yellow, faded letters. Color came into her face as she did so, and perhaps her hands trembled a little. To have been so sure of triumph, and yet so nearly defeated ! To have toiled and labored and waited for years, and in the end to have been foiled by a few miserable, almost illegible sheets of paper ! For they would have foiled her : she knew they would. Her sister's handwriting — that foreign, cramped, painful writing, hard to decipher, as others had found it — was legible enough to her. In five minutes she had not read them all ; but she had read and seen enough to convince her that such witnesses as these were more than powerful enough to destroy in an instant all her plans, all her schemes, all her hopes, all her resolves.

And now she held these silent, solemn witnesses in her hand to do with as she willed ; and Arthur, the last but one — and that one a maniac of ninety — of the O'Neils of Castle Garvagh, was dying, — dying close at hand. Another woman but his sister-in-law might perhaps have faltered, and hesitated, — felt at least some pang of pity, some passing doubt, some irresolution ; but she felt nothing of it all. A momentary doubt — yes, for she had half put the fatal letters in her pocket, when she hastily drew them out again. Perhaps she did not like to steal them from the house ; perhaps she disliked the sensation of actually carrying away stolen goods ; perhaps she mistrusted herself or others. Heaven only knows. Heaven only knows what it was in her heart and mind during that solemn instant, — during which she had approached the fire, and, with one steady hand stirring it into a bright, warm blaze, had with the other dropped the fatal letters into it. And thus it was that while Arthur O'Neil was fighting his last desperate fight for life, here in his own home, at his own hearth, this cruel deed was calmly done.

A quarter of an hour later, Ethel returned to the library. That alarm was over. Mr. O'Neil had not died yet ; and his mother, who had fainted away from grief and exhaustion, had been carried to her own room, and there — poor little woman ! — was now peacefully asleep. A vague uneasiness had brought the girl back. She thought it scarcely probable that Madame O'Neil would depart without seeing her again ; and the thought that she was still in the house was intolerable. But she was wrong. Madame O'Neil had gone. The room was empty, still, and pleasant, as though no tragedy had just been played out within it. Ethel drew a deep sigh of relief. Suddenly her eye, by chance, rested on the little Indian box, which lay in the same position upon the *console*, and a horrible dread seized her. But the next instant she was re-assured.

The little packet of letters was there, tied carefully up, as she had herself tied them, with a blue silk ribbon. But Ethel, sharply realizing the dreadful possibility which had just been incurred, then and there brought letters and box and all into her own room, and carefully locked them up.

As Lord O'Neil had said, the O'Neils were a long-lived family, and tough, and

hard to kill. Never had a man been nearer death, and yet not died, than Arthur O'Neil. It had been a sharp, close struggle; and he came out of it weak and helpless as an infant, but yet — perhaps because he was resolved not to die — living still. But his recovery was slow, despairingly slow. Several days passed before it could be called a recovery at all; and several more, when the joy of hope crept once more through the house, before he was capable of moving hand or foot, or of even making a sign that this life for which he had fought so desperately was really worth the trouble of keeping. After the first great re-action of happiness had passed away, it was a trying time. Particularly so to Ethel; for it had to be passed, for the most part, in solitude and idleness. Nobody wanted her. Now that excitement and danger were passed, Flaherty, the autocrat of the sick-room, was too discreet and prudish (prudent she called it) to allow a giddy young girl's incomings and outgoings to disturb its repose and peacefulness; and Mrs. O'Neil, with the ingratitude of happiness, was completely engrossed in her son. And so things went on for a little, till one day, when the old lady, sitting by his bedside, was indulging in the dismal pleasure of a retrospect.

"How on earth he caught that fever is and always will be a puzzle to me," she told Dr. O'Toole, who was paying his morning visit; "and, the more I think of it, the less I understand it. All the precautions I had taken, or at least was going to take. Now, there it is, Arthur: if you had only waited for a couple of days, till"—

Dr. O'Toole guffawed loudly; and even Mr. O'Neil laughed — a feeble little laugh — over the premature collapse of the old lady's grand campaign.

"How did he catch the fever, ma'am?" the good doctor repeated. "Why, to be sure, he caught it from Dan Moore, the widow's son. Lord bless my soul!" as a vehement wink from the invalid impudently warned him to pause.

"From Dan Moore! good gracious! How could Arthur have caught it from him? You don't mean to say that?" And Mrs. O'Neil looked from one to the other aghast and perplexed.

It was a critical moment; but Dr. O'Toole, by the aid of what he was in the habit of terming a "bouncer," easily extricated himself from the difficulty. By and by, when Mrs. O'Neil had left the room, and the two gentlemen were alone,—

"You are a fool, doctor," quoth Mr. O'Neil pleasantly. "You know that I did

not really get the fever from poor young Moore. I was only in the cabin that day for about five minutes. The thing is impossible."

"Very well," said the doctor. "It is impossible if you like; but, beyond yea or nay, it is a fact for all that. Some men can do things of this sort with impunity, and others can't. You are one of those that can't; and so I have told you a hundred thousand times."

"Humbug!" was the invalid's irreverent comment. "By the way, who told you about our — my having gone near Dan Moore at all?" he inquired carelessly.

"Who told me, sir? Why, Miss Ethel, to be sure! Wasn't she nearly breaking her heart about it? And wasn't I well inclined to give her a good sound scolding too? No: by the way, I was not," proceeded the doctor, shaking his head, and looking wise; "for, as I told her, one don't expect sense from chits of girls of the sort; but from a man of your age — upon my word, sir, it is ridiculous!"

Mr. O'Neil looked a little impatient and a little uneasy.

"Moonshine!" he observed. "It had nothing whatever to do with my illness at all. Of that I am convinced. I was not well when I came home; though you were all noticing my good looks. But I was worn out and exhausted and excited, and had probably laid the seeds of the attack. I hope that she — Miss Mildmay did not tease herself, did not really imagine any thing of the sort," he added quickly.

"Hum. It is my opinion that she was teasing herself, — breaking her heart, in fact. And it is also my opinion, sir," and here the doctor lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, and gave one of his most appalling winks, "that the girl is sweet upon you. I give you my solemn word it is."

Probably the good doctor only meant pleasantly to enliven his patient. Certainly he was by no means prepared, and not a little alarmed, by the sudden start and deep flush his announcement produced. But Mr. O'Neil only laughed, and turned his back upon him.

"Doctor, I give you up," he said. "Reason is tottering at last. Go away and let me sleep."

But he did not sleep for very long. Presently his mother, stealing on tiptoe into the room not to disturb him, found him wide awake, his eyes a little brighter, his face a shade redder, than half an hour ago.

"Used Miss Mildmay never come to see me while I was ill, mother?" he inquired abruptly.

"Bless me! I thought you were asleep. To be sure she did, Arthur! and, what is more, when you were very bad, she helped to nurse you very nicely indeed. She is a good child, Arthur,—a good child, but desperately wilful. I tried to shut the door on her at first on account of the infection; but, as you know, there is no preventing the girl doing a thing when she is bent on it, and she told me that she would get in through the keyhole if there was no other way. Upon my word, I think she would too," concluded the old lady with a gentle laugh.

"And I knew nothing of it all."

"Of course not. You were out of your senses for days and days; and the Great Mogul might have come to nurse you, and you would have been none the wiser. Poor fellow! Poor boy!" And she fondled him as though he were a child.

He smiled a weak, grateful smile, and passively submitted to her caresses; but it was evident that he was not perfectly satisfied. Presently out it came.

"I should like to see Ethel," he said in rather a low voice. "By and by when I am up and on the sofa, you know, suppose you ask her to come, mother."

Perhaps a momentary pang of jealousy shot through the old lady's heart; for a little cloud darkened her fair forehead for an instant, and she replied with a shade of dryness,—

"Well, perhaps so, Arthur,—perhaps so. We'll see about it. But she is such a giddy child! and the doctor says you must not be excited or disturbed."

"She will not excite or disturb me, mother; and I want to see her." And he said it so pleadingly, that Mrs. O'Neil could not but relent.

That afternoon she came behind the young girl suddenly, as she stood at the window, looking out blankly at the dull, gray world, and the leafless trees, and the sad-looking sky.

"Arthur would like to see you, child," she told her abruptly. "Will you come to him?"

Ethel turned round sharply, coloring up to the roots of her hair with pleasure and surprise.

"Would he really? Oh, yes! I'll come."

The old lady gave her a keen, anxious glance.

"Mind, you must be very quiet, and not talk," she warned her a little dryly. "He is not to be excited, remember."

An injunction which Ethel obeyed after her own fashion. She had her little speech ready,—had indeed had it ready for many

a long day of impatient waiting. Until she had made it, until she had told her guardian of her sorrow and her remorse, and had begged of him to forgive her, she knew that it was quite impossible for her to feel comfortable or happy again. But now that the opportunity had come at last, and that she was by his side, holding his hand, looking at him, the words stuck in her throat, and she was speechless. So was he. It was a silent meeting.

After all, it was he that spoke first. "I have been longing for you," he said. "Why did you not come before?"

"They would not let me. They thought that I would only disturb you."

"Disturb me! Very likely. When the sight of you does me more good than any tonic in the world;" and he gave her a kindly smile.

Ethel's eyes filled up with tears. For the life of her she could not help it, he looked so white and weak and ill. And the wreck before her was her work, her doing. The thought was simply intolerable.

"Does you good? I? O Mr. O'Neil!"

"Well, what, Miss Mildmay? Ethel, if you cry it will be all up with me," he said in a tone of desperation.

"I can't help it; oh! I can't help it." And then there came a few strangled sobs. "Mr. O'Neil, will you ever forgive me? Can you ever forgive me? You know it was my fault,—altogether my fault. And I am miserable, dreadfully miserable."

A nice way of not exciting him. White as Mr. O'Neil was before, he was a hundred times whiter now,—so white, indeed, that Ethel thought he was going to faint, and flew terrified to the bell; and then Mrs. O'Neil and Flaherty came rushing in, and Ethel was ignominiously turned out; and faint off he did in right earnest.



CHAPTER XXXII.

STRANGE were the rumors and reports that came floating across the brown, bleak bogs from Castle Garvagh. Day after day Dr. O'Toole brought some new and startling piecee of gossip with him to Mount Druid, picked up here and there, and which we may be sure diversified not a little the daily monotony of existence to its inhabitants.

All the world, indeed, was talking; any world, that is, that existed in that thinly

populated region. Mysterious whispers were creeping through the air; wild suppositions and suggestions were wafted upon the chill wintry breezes. Every day gave birth to some thrilling flight of imagination, or some sensational piece of intelligence such as made people stare and talk, and marvel what was coming next.

That something was to come soon seemed to be by most people taken as a matter of course; public opinion being somehow or other raised to a pitch that loudly demanded satisfaction of one kind or another. But, concerning what actually had come, meagre, indeed, was the intelligence that could be relied upon.

All that was known beyond "yea or nay," as Dr. O'Toole emphatically expressed it, was, that the "Countess" and the "Pretender," as they were called, had arrived to take possession, it was said; for the old lord, the world decided, was really going to die at last, and, for once in his life, to oblige everybody. But the world came to this important conclusion on hearsay only; for the real state of Lord O'Neil's health was a mystery which had yet to be penetrated. He was madder than ever: that much, at least, seemed certain. All sorts of strange stories were circulating on that subject — stories that told of extraordinary freaks and caprices and outbreaks, which made the lives of all those that were busy closely watching him, hard lives to bear.

Big with intelligence, one day, came the doctor. The last freak was the queerest and most wonderful of all; and his jovial eyes twinkled merrily as he recounted it to his old friend. The "countess" had been dismissed, turned out, baggage and all, of the castle. Whether she had entered it with or without an invitation, was not known. But what was known was, that a summary invitation to leave it had been given her, and that yesterday she and her sister had departed to take up their residence in the steward's modest little house on the demesne.

Mrs. O'Neil clapped her hands with delight; for, needless to say, the favor which the foreigners had been for the last few weeks enjoying at the castle had cruelly aggrieved the old lady's heart. "And the young fellow — what of him, doctor? Has he been sent about his business too?" she demanded eagerly.

But Dr. O'Toole had no such pleasing intelligence to impart on that score. This was the strangest of all. While the old lord had apparently taken a fit of the most lively aversion to the countess, the pretender was still in high favor. From the very

first, Lord O'Neil had taken a fancy to him; but now this fancy had grown into quite a mania, and he would hardly let him out of his sight. From morning till night they were together, playing at the organ, wandering through the house or over the grounds. The poor count had got more than he had bargained for when he had come to Castle Garvah, and was, perhaps, beginning to feel the affection which he had so unexpectedly evoked a little oppressive and overpowering.

Mrs. O'Neil's face darkened. "The man is mad,—as mad as a March hare!" she exclaimed indignantly. "To think that he, too, should be taken in by such a barefaced impostor!"

"True enough, he's mad," replied the doctor thoughtfully. "One of the greatest proofs of insanity are these violent hatreds and likings to which he is subject. Upon my word, I am thinking it is a crying shame not to have him locked up and put out of harm's way."

The old lady wrung her hands. "What can we do? what can we do?" she inquired piteously. "Those Irwins have him completely in their hands now; and it would look dreadful for us to be the first to propose such a thing,—when, too, the old creature can't live much longer. I defy him to live much longer," she said desperately.

"Unless he is sold body and soul to Old Nick," replied the doctor with a guffaw: "well, no matter, no matter! All I say is, that the countess is a clever woman; and that it is a good job that whatever the unfortunate old man says or does don't matter much in the long-run. Now, if it were a case of his being able to make an heir according to his own liking, Master Arthur, with his lazy, proud ways, would be cut out in a twinkling. I wonder what it would take to make him go and dance attendance upon his lordship as that young foreign fellow is doing so diligently."

"True enough, doctor; true enough. Pride is a good enough thing in its way,—in moderation, that is,—but I have told Arthur a hundred times that there are occasions when one would do better and wiser to pocket one's pride, and that he ought not to have entirely neglected his uncle as of late years he had done. But"—and she shook her head dolefully.

"All's well that ends well," quoth the doctor cheerfully; "and, provided the old sinner would only think well of making himself scarce in the world, never fear but that all their foreign toadyism and grimacings would serve them precious little. Never fear

but that twelve honest British jurymen will make short work of all that, and of the whole abominable fabric of their disgraceful imposture,—blow it off the face of the earth, ma'am!" And he gave the table a violent thump. "By the way, I don't think Master Arthur is troubling himself much about Castle Garvagh just now," concluded the doctor, lowering his voice, and winking tremendously.

Mrs. O'Neil colored. "What do you mean, doctor? what do you mean?" she inquired nervously.

"Ahem, ma'am! I can tell you that it is something else besides my physic that's curing him so fast." And he nodded his head solemnly.

Mrs. O'Neil groaned. "Doctor, she's a terrible girl,—terrible. O Lord! O Lord! Why on earth had I ever any thing to say to her?"

Dr. O'Toole opened his eyes. "Why, where's the harm? Suppose they like one another, why on earth shouldn't they make a match of it, ma'am?"

"Suppose! Humbug! Suppose she is making a fool of him, as she makes a fool of every single man that comes within a yard of her. Doctor, I tell you that she is a terrible girl."

"Hum." And the doctor looked contemplative.

"And now the poor fellow is weak and foolish, and—It makes both Flaherty and me sick," she said, waxing irate.

"Hum. It strikes me that both you and Flaherty are completely out, ma'am," remarked the doctor oracularly.

"Don't be a fool, doctor! As if you knew any thing about these matters. The saucy minx is just amusing herself with my poor boy as—"

"Com—pletely out," repeated the doctor, making a rush at the door, and disappearing.

With disturbed wrinkles puckering her smooth forehead, Mrs. O'Neil hurried up stairs. Her son, though still an invalid, was yet now able to leave his room, and to spend most of the day in the library. Ethel was with him as usual,—had been with him, indeed, for many hours; for notwithstanding the disastrous result of that first interview, and the consequent peremptory interference of the authorities, the patient had set them all at defiance, and had insisted upon being given as much of his ward's society as possible.

"I am selfish, I know," he had said apologetically to her once or twice; "but sick people may be selfish, and you will tell me when I have become too *exigeant*."

But Ethel had not told him so yet; and Mr. O'Neil evidently still considered himself at liberty to indulge his selfishness. At all events, they had spent pretty nearly the whole of this morning together,—not talking the whole time, for Ethel had been reading aloud to him,—but still talking a little.

There had come some rather interesting letters that morning, one of which had apparently afforded not a little satisfaction to Mr. O'Neil. It was from Gen. Mildmay, Ethel's other guardian; and it contained the intelligence that his return from India, which was to have taken place at the end of January, was now, owing to unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances, postponed to the month of March. "I must therefore beg of you," he wrote to Mr. O'Neil, "to take charge of my dear young niece for two or three months longer,—an arrangement which, I trust, will not inconvenience you or Mrs. O'Neil, and which will add to the already immense obligation I owe to both of you for your truly great kindness to my dear brother's poor child."

If a little formal and ceremonious, it was yet a kind letter, and evidently kindly meant. But Ethel looked a little grave and sad over it for all that.

"I wonder what he is like," she said. "I believe I saw him once, years ago, when I was very little; but I forgot him almost entirely." And then she looked thoughtfully straight into the fire.

"At all events," said Mr. O'Neil after a pause, "he has given us a respite. There must be some good in him."

She smiled. Mrs. O'Neil was right. Ethel Mildmay was a terrible girl. Her smile was the demure, saucy, irresistible smile of old.

"Then, badly-behaved ward as I am, yet you are not sorry to have me for a little while longer, Mr. O'Neil? But, though you are not to be rid of me, I shall not be in your power very much longer. Remember, I cease to be an 'infant'—is it not that the newspapers call it?—on the first of January." And she nodded her pretty, fair head playfully.

"You will be an infant to the end of the chapter, Miss Mildmay. But you are right. Where are we now? Seventeenth of December, I declare. Fourteen days more, and we are mutually free. Do you know that I am longing for my release?"

"Indeed!"

"Positively longing. The duties are too onerous: I could not stand them a day longer."

Ethel glanced at him a puzzled, rather

shy glance. "Are you serious?" she inquired.

"I should think so." But he smiled rather suspiciously. "The fact is," he went on then, "that I am and always have been a slave to duty. Very different from you, Miss Mildmay, who don't seem to know even the meaning of the word. Well, being your guardian, I have a certain conception of the duties of guardianship, the fulfilment of which I am beginning to feel — well, to speak frankly — intolerable. Now do you understand?"

Ethel opened her violet eyes. "Not in the least."

"Come, that is too bad, when you do understand perfectly. However, I will explain if you like."

She looked — perhaps ever so little — alarmed. "Explanations are dreadful things."

"Yes. But one can't always go on living in a fog. A man can do it — when he must — for a certain time; but there is a limit somewhere. In short, so long as I am your guardian, I don't consider that I can in honor ask you to let me be any thing else to you. Now do you understand, Miss Mildmay?"

He spoke quite coolly and collectedly, — so coolly, that, though his meaning certainly was clear to the meanest capacity, she could yet make a poor little feint of not comprehending it.

"It seems to me that guardianship and friendship go very nicely together," she said, looking straight on before her.

"Oh, yes! very nicely, admirably, — twin-sisters, in short, with a joint sort of life. You'll see that when one dies the other will die too, Miss Mildmay."

"Mr. O'Neil!"

"A fact. Something tells me, that, when I cease to be your guardian, I shall cease to be your friend," he went on, laughing. "That is, if I am your friend at all."

"You are: you know you are!"

"Am I? Once upon a time I was not, at any rate: at least, not with your leave; though perhaps I was without it. Once upon a time, you looked upon me more in the light of an enemy than of any thing else, I think."

"Once upon a time I was a fool. You are very ill natured to talk about *that*," Ethel said with tremulous petulance.

"About what?"

"About that time at Nice." And she jumped up suddenly, as if she were going to run away.

But he put out his hand, and caught her just in time. "At all events we are good

friends now; will be good friends for a little while longer, will we not?" he asked her with a smile.

"We are — we will! Mr. O'Neil, what do you mean! she exclaimed with sudden alarm. "I have no friend in the world but you, — you and Mrs. O'Neil; and, if you get tired of me and give me up, what is to become of me?"

"Get tired of you! Give you up! Turn you out in the frost and cold on the first of January! Well, and supposing we do, where will you go to, Miss Mildmay?"

"I don't know."

She said it with a sudden sadness, standing before him with sudden, bright tears in her eyes. "I don't know." There was an unconscious pathos in the desolate little words.

A pathos which evidently affected Mr. O'Neil rather overpoweringly, for he grew whiter than before. "Turn you out in the frost and snow," he repeated with a tender little laugh. "Poor child! Poor child!"

There was a pause. Her face was averted, and her head drooping, — rather a forlorn and melancholy sort of droop. There was something in her attitude, something hard to describe or to express, but which meant that she was feeling just then desolate and lonely and abandoned, — feeling herself to be the orphan she was.

"Poor child!" repeated her guardian with that strange, tender, painful laugh.

Quick as lightning the young girl turned on him. "Not so poor!" she exclaimed with a gay, saucy smile, — "not so poor as you think. I have a friend; yes, I have, — a friend who will be very glad to see me if you do turn me out. Christine Barbier is her name; and I have a letter from her in my pocket this very minute, in which she says that she hopes I will soon go and visit her and stop with her. There! Would you like to see it?" And she flourished Madame Barbier's letter triumphantly in his face.

One instant on the verge of sentiment, forlorn, and tearful; the next, mocking, gay, defiant. No doubt about it, whether as ward or friend or beloved, Miss Mildmay was not an easy girl to deal with.

"So you have a friend actually," her guardian said, with, perhaps, a shade of pique in his tone. For to men the quicksilver natures of women are inexplicable, and they find it totally impossible to comprehend the ease and quickness with which the youngest and most innocent girl will know how to glide out of difficult situations. "Actually you can boast of a friend. Well, Miss Mildmay, do you purpose to

accept Madame Barbier's hospitable invitation?"

"I'll think about it. If you and Mrs. O'Neil show symptoms of being tired of me, I certainly shall."

"Make use of your freedom, and, the instant you get your twenty-one-years-old wings, fly away from the cage. It has been a dull cage for you, undoubtedly, poor bird!"

"Yes, it has," she answered frankly.

"And you will be glad, very glad, to make your escape?"

She laughed and flushed, and did not reply. Then, after a pause, "Mr. O'Neil," she said suddenly.

"Yes."

"There is a puzzle that puzzles my brain terribly. May I tell it to you?"

"By all means." And he looked curiously.

"How is it — Why did you not marry Christine?" she inquired abruptly.

A somewhat overwhelming and startling question apparently. Mr. O'Neil stared at her, amazed. "Because — I was not thinking of marrying in those days," he answered shortly.

"I have often wondered about it," proceeded Ethel thoughtfully. "Christine was such a dear, clever, good girl, and" —

"And — *après, mademoiselle?*"

"You know that she did not care about that horrid M. Barbier," Ethel said vehemently.

"And therefore I was to marry her. Is that *your* notion of logic, Miss Mildmay? But I did not care for her, — in *that* way, you know."

"It was a pity," Ethel said demurely.

"Do you think so?" And he laughed a little uneasily. "Yes, it is true," he went on thoughtfully after a pause, "Christine is all you say, — clever, charming, good. She would, perhaps, too, have married me had I asked her; but — I tell you I never thought about it," he said frankly.

"No?"

"No. A man can't make himself like a woman. At least, I never could."

"But he can make a woman like him?"

"He can try."

"And what if he fails?"

"He can break his heart."

Ethel laughed. "Hearts don't break so easily." But her laugh broke off in the midst rather abruptly, and ended in a short little sigh.

It was at this point in the conversation, that Mrs. O'Neil came bustling into the room after her confabulation with the doctor, — bustling in, looking important and

anxious. "The doctor has gone to have a look at James's sore finger," she announced, "but will be here in a minute." And Mrs. O'Neil glanced suspiciously from Ethel's face to that of her son, both of which looked a little flushed and disturbed by her abrupt entrance.

"How red you are, child! — red as a turkey-cock!" she exclaimed with more irritation than discretion.

"Am I? The fire is so hot." And she put her hands to her cheeks.

"Well, then, go out and get some air. You have been in the whole morning. You'll ruin your complexion, child, if you don't take more fresh air."

There was no mistaking this broad hint; and Ethel took it and departed. No sooner had she gone, than Mrs. O'Neil communicated the doctor's last piece of intelligence. "What do you think of that, Arthur?" she demanded, crowing gleefully. "Just think of that dreadful woman being turned out bodily from the castle."

Mr. O'Neil looked thoughtful. It had been only a day or two ago that he had been informed of his sister-in-law's arrival in the country at all, the news having been considered too exciting for him. Even then it had excited him more than was good for him; now he jumped up from his sofa. "It is intolerable for me to be lying here doing nothing," he exclaimed: "yet what is there to be done?"

His mother soothed him. "Nothing," she said, "nothing, Arthur; and, as Dr. O'Toole says" —

"The only thing I can do is to be ready, and, thank God! I am ready. You have those letters safe, mother?"

They are locked up in the wardrobe in Ethel's room. Of course they are safe, Arthur, — quite safe."

He was silent for a minute or two, thinking. "In Ethel's room," he repeated. "How came they to be there, mother?"

"I gave them to her to read. You told me to give them to her, you remember. And to tell the truth, ever since — all that terrible time when you were so ill — I had not the heart to worry about them."

He took her hand and stroked it gently. "Poor, poor mother! You, at least, are fond of me."

"Fond of you — Arthur!"

"Did she read the letters?" he asked quickly in a low voice.

"I suppose she did: I never asked her. We never speak on the subject. Of course she read them," went on the old lady meditatively; "and, Arthur, what is more, though the child does not say any thing, I

know what she thinks. She hates these people like poison, as I, God forgive me, hate them myself. Ever since she has heard of them being in the country, there is no getting her to put her foot outside the house, for fear of meeting them, I'm positively certain."

"And she has never seen them?"

"No."

"And they have made no attempt to get at her?"

"Not one. As if they would dare!" And the little lady's eyes flashed with the fire of twenty.

Her son smiled, but it was an anxious smile; and he sighed a little wearily "Of course she must know what the truth is," he said.

"She does, Arthur; she does. And yet"—

"And yet, mother"—

"And yet—I tell it to you, Arthur: I must tell it to you," the little lady cried desperately. "It will make no difference,—not a jot. All the Castle Garvaghs in the world would make no difference. Ethel is a giddy girl, a terrible girl; but she is not worldly: I must give her that credit. She would marry a man tomorrow who had not a shilling to bless himself with, if she only cared about him."

And Mrs. O'Neil was right, as in those matters a clever woman generally is. There were two men who loved Ethel, each after his fashion, but with all his heart. But their very passion made them blind and brutal and unjust. They both had judged her wrongly.

"If she only cared about him," Mrs. O'Neil repeated.

He stood up and leant upon the mantelpiece, gazing into the mirror which hung over it. "How dreadfully I look!" he said, turning away impatiently after an instant.

His little mother was gazing at him pitifully. It was true: he did look badly,—ill and white and worn. And alas, alas! those dreadful gray hairs were crowding fearfully to the front. But of course she denied it all roundly. "Not at all!" she asserted stoutly: "you look very nice and young and"— But it was no good. She could not go on. "O Arthur, Arthur!" she exclaimed, standing up on tiptoe, and laying her two little hands on his shoulder. "There was a time when you only cared for your mother and for Castle Garvagh. Tell me that it is so now."

He looked down at her, smiling. "But you were always wanting me to marry, mother."

"So I was; so I was. God forgive me! I wanted you to marry some nice, sensible, steady girl, who"—

"Who would have me; eh, mother?"

She groaned, and wrung her hands. "Oh that terrible child! that saucy minx,—that provoking"—

"But you are fond of her, mother."

"Fond of her? Of course I am; of course I am. I can't help it; but"—

"There it is. I can't help it, either."

And so it is. Love springs up under some people's feet. Ethel was one of these. With all her faults, with all her foibles, with all her follies, with her violet eyes, and sweet sunny smiles, there was no help for it,—there it was,—one should love her. Ah, who will mend the world's crooked ways, and fashion the hearts of men to sense and justice?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BEYOND a doubt, Lord O'Neil was mad; a raging lunatic, his cousin, Mrs. O'Neil, decided, when the next day brought what she chose to consider a convincing proof that reason had entirely deserted him,—nothing less marvellous than an invitation to Castle Garvagh,—an invitation to herself and her son, and their charming young guest (it was thus that Ethel was designated), to bear him company, as had for a long time been their custom, on the last day of the old year, that so the health of the new year should be drunk by a pleasant family-party. It was a funny, shaky little note, with a decided touch of satire in it. The *pleasant family-party* looked suspicious, and one could imagine the old lord's wicked smile as he penned the words.

Little Mrs. O'Neil was put into quite a rage by it. "Pleasant family-party indeed!" she said, tossing the letter, which, by the way, was written on the shabbiest, poorest, most miserable sheet of note-paper that could be imagined, back to her son. "Mighty pleasant, to be sure! He means to insult us: of course he does. Such an idea!"

Mr. O'Neil laughed, and did not at once reply. "It certainly is an odd idea," he said then. "Poor old wretch!" And yet—Do you know, mother, I have half a mind to go?"

"To go! Arthur, are you mad too?"

"Perhaps I am. I don't feel like it ex-

acty. But I have rather a prejudice for old customs ; and he takes care to remind us that this is one."

" Old nonsense ! I have not eaten a crust of bread in the house for the last three years,— yes, three years exactly this Christmas,— and I certainly am not going to begin such ridiculous work again. A man who has never given one a shilling's worth ; and all to gratify this absurd whim of his about 'old customs.' " And little Mrs. O'Neil flared up. " Arthur, I'm amazed at you,— positively amazed. And when one thinks of whom one would meet there ! " she concluded, flushing and frowning.

Mr. O'Neil was silent for a minute or two. " Yes ; three years," he said then thoughtfully. " The two last Christmases we have been away, you know, mother. At least I have."

" So have I. Last year I went to Dublin on purpose to avoid it. I never thought he would have the audacity to propose such a thing this year, under the *present* circumstances ; " and she drew herself up.

" Well, they are odd circumstances, I confess ; " and he laughed. " Yet now that my sister-in-law is turned out — No : I certainly should not like to meet her."

" I should think not," interrupted Mrs. O'Neil emphatically.

" But somehow or other that young fellow — Do you know, I actually feel some curiosity about him ? I believe I want to know what he is made of, whether — The fact is, mother, I don't feel jealous of him any more, — there ! That is it, I believe ; " and he laughed.

" Upon my word ! It seems to me that you have reason to be jealous of him, then, Arthur," Mrs. O'Neil said with considerable asperity. " Just think of him, before the whole country, being installed there as Lord O'Neil's heir ! And that is what is given out, I tell you. Oh ! it makes me sick : upon my word it does ; " and she nearly cried with vexation.

" Oh ! I did not mean that," Mr. O'Neil said a shade impatiently.

" Did you not ? What did you mean, then ? "

He leant back in his easy-chair wearily, for he was weak still, and easily fatigued, but with a smile, — a smile which somehow became more of a smile, when at the very moment, as if in answer to his mother's question, the door opened, and Ethel appeared. She came in hesitatingly, actually even a little shyly, as of late she had acquired a fashion of doing, — came in as a person does when not perfectly sure that the interruption he is occasioning is a wel-

come one. But if Mrs. O'Neil frowned a little, and, what is more, gave vent to a dismal little groan of extreme irritation, which, however, perhaps the girl did not hear, Mr. O'Neil's smile re-assured her, — a pleasant, glad, welcome smile as it was, which ought to have set her at ease at once, had she required to be set at ease. Ethel was what the French call *journalière*. To be sure, she always was more or less pretty ; but some days she was much prettier than others. To-day was one of her pretty days. Perhaps it was the result of a bright purple ribbon upon her black dress and in her fair hair, which had of late been permitted to relieve the sombreness of her mourning ; or perhaps (and this was nearer the truth) it was this very new-born shyness which had stolen over her, and which gave her a new and peculiar grace, hovering like a light, softening cloud upon a bright, sunny picture. At all events, this morning she looked pretty — distractingly pretty — yet slightly grave and anxious ; and, though she gave her guardian an answering smile, it was a troubled, not perfectly secure one. " I did not mean that," Mr. O'Neil repeated, speaking to his mother, and looking at Ethel. " You know that I meant something quite different, mother."

" Did you, Arthur ? " And the old lady looked at Ethel too. A bright, radiant, tender face the girl's was, and her fair head was planted firmly and gracefully upon a round, slender throat. Tender and soft, as we know, but with pride and gay defiance lurking at the corners of the soft, red lips, and in the dim depths of her sweet, cloudy eyes. Mrs. O'Neil turned away quickly, and looked at the fire, bobbing her head vexedly. The mother's heart was sore, — sore. Arthur might hope and believe and resolve ; but — Ah ! all men were fools ; even he, her heart's darling, — he, the best, the wisest, the cleverest, of them all. And it was *she* who had harbored this dangerous siren ; she who had, in spite of warning and sense and prudence, taken this second Lorelei home with her to comb her golden hair, and shipwreck the unfortunate navigators who ventured within reach of her charmed wavelets. It was too bad, — too bad ! Poor little Mrs. O'Neil could have cried with rage and grief.

" An invitation has come for you, Miss Mildmay, — actually an invitation to a party," Mr. O'Neil was meanwhile saying to his ward.

" An invitation ! " And Ethel stopped short in the middle of the room. " Not really ? To what ? " And the girl looked enchanted.

"A new-year's party, or rather an old-year's," he replied. "Ah, mother! see how delighted she looks. She is panting for gayety, poor child!"

"Nothing particularly gay about that, I am sure," Mrs. O'Neil said dryly. But her kind heart melted at the glad look that had come into the girl's eyes. "Of course, the child is dull," she said,—"dull to death; and of course she must have some amusement. After Christmas, we will bring her up to town and about a little. And I tell you what it is, child, I'll present you at court, and show you something of the world; and no doubt you'll have a dozen of men in love with you in a twinkling." And the old lady forgot all her troubles in the glowing anticipation.

Ethel laughed and blushed. "I must learn how to make a courtesy, must I not?" And on the spot she gayly set to work. "Now, Mrs. O'Neil, you will be the court, and—oh! I had forgotten. Mr. O'Neil, where is the party really?" she inquired anxiously.

"At Castle Garvagh. Here is the invitation."

"Castle Garvagh!" She looked petrified, amazed,—perhaps, even, a little alarmed. Her guardian watched her rather anxiously as she read the short note through.

"Well," he asked then, "would you like to go?"

"Nonsense!" interposed Mrs. O'Neil. "Of course, she would not like to go. He is only joking, child."

"No: I don't think I should like to go," Ethel said slowly and deliberately, while all at once the sunshine seemed to have faded out of her face. Her guardian looked at her uneasily, wondering—painfully wondering—what the sudden change meant. As to Ethel, she was thinking of nothing just then but those words—almost threatening words they seemed to her to be—of the count's the last time that she had seen him, with which he had told her that he would believe on; take no refusal so long as she was not of age and her own mistress to give it to him. And on the first day of the new year she would be of age; and he would be there, ardent, impetuous, eloquent, backed up by his uncle's favor, as sanguine, confident, impossible to convince of the truth that she really did not love him—perhaps never had loved him—as ever. "No: I don't think I should like to go," she said; and all at once the dull, hopeless weight of the O'Neil mystery, and, worse still, the dull, hopeless weight of the perplexing, miserable mystery of her

own heart, seemed to close in upon her on every side, like a blank, gray, hideous wall which it was impossible to scale or escape from. She was standing in the middle of the room, and she was looking down at the floor thoughtfully. Suddenly she raised her eyes, meeting those of her guardian fixed upon her with an expression that not a little startled her, as that peculiar, long, tender, yet slightly imperious glance of his invariably did. "Do you mean to go, Mr. O'Neil?" she asked with a nervous little laugh.

"We'll think about it," he answered absently; and indeed he was not thinking much of the Castle Garvagh invitation just then. "I don't like to go precisely," he went on; "and yet something tells me that I shall perhaps go. I have got a presentiment—yes, mother, now and then I actually do believe in presentiments—that I shall break bread once more at my uncle's table."

"Presentiment! humbug!" quoth Mrs. O'Neil. "It is easy enough for people to pretend they have presentiments when they have quite made up their minds what they are going to do beforehand. And as to breaking bread for the last time!—God forgive me for saying it, and certainly I would not commit the sin of wishing anybody's death,—but we have been thinking that it would be the last time for many a long year." And she sighed a rueful, impatient little sigh.

There was a silence after this. Ethel had gone over to the window, and was standing there, looking dreamily upon the outside world. A dull, cheerless world enough it was; a sad, gray sky, bare trees, brown grass, and a sighing wind sweeping across it all. How long she stood there she did not know; Ethel, we are aware, has a habit of falling into reveries in which time speeds fast. Behind her in the pleasant room one or two changes have meanwhile occurred. One of them is that Mrs. O'Neil has left it. Poor old lady! her gentle, loving heart was distracted. Must she not remain? Was it not her obvious duty to remain, though *even* she, her son's mother, might possibly be more welcome by her absence than her presence? But must she not save him in spite of himself?—must she not prevent him making a fool of himself, as a horrible instinct made her believe that he was about to do? Must she not throw her arms round his neck, and rescue him, in spite of himself, from Lorelei's wicked toils? Little did Ethel, standing quietly there in that unconsciously pretty and graceful attitude, suspect the storm

which was raging in her old friend's gentle bosom, and for which she was responsible. Little did each woman guess what thoughts were distracting the other; about as much, indeed, as we often guess of the hopes and fears, and strange, puzzling secrets which torture the lives of those with whom we live.

After all, Mrs. O'Neil might as well have obeyed her conscience and remained in the room, as have disobeyed it and gone out of it. The old lady's imagination had run away with her. After the confidence which she had forced last night from her son's unwilling lips, it had pictured a declaration and love-scene as imminent and inevitable. Such self-restraint as he had practised up to this time was inexplicable to her: to suppose that it could be sternly practised longer seemed impossible. But she was utterly mistaken. Now that the door had slowly and reluctantly closed behind her, the situation did not change in the least. Her son did not, as she perhaps pictured to herself that he would, throw himself passionately at Ethel's feet; nor did that young lady politely ask him to rise, and then with gay, saucy scorn stab his heart, and tell him that he was an idiot for his pains. Nothing of the sort occurred. Nothing of any sort, indeed, occurred. Ethel stood at the window, quite unconscious of her departure; and Mr. O'Neil calmly opened his despatch-box, and seemed inclined to devote himself to business. First of all he wrote a letter,—a dry, formal, business-letter,—and wrote it, too, with a cool, steady hand, which apparently the proximity of his lady-love in nowise influenced. Mrs. O'Neil, if she had looked through the key-hole and seen it all, would have probably rubbed her eyes with amazement, romantic, excitable little woman that she was. Then he proceeded to look over and arrange some papers which the despatch-box contained, putting each one in its place, after, as the case might be, a hasty or a careful glance through it. Finally he turned to the mantle-piece, upon which lay a certain little packet of letters, tied with a blue string, which his mother had given him half an hour ago, it having been in her possession, or, at all events, to her knowledge, in safe keeping, during his illness; and which either laziness or languor, or perhaps some secret motive of his own, had up to this prevented him asking her for, and took it down, and held it for a minute or two in his hands, looking at it. He had not even asked her for this packet this morning; but she had brought it to him of her own accord, saying that Ethel had begged of her to take the letters

from her and give them to him. And now he held it in his hands, and was looking at it. He did not seem quite certain whether he would open it or not at first, for, indeed, he knew the contents of the letters it contained off by heart; and perhaps his eyes, not quite strong yet, did not care to fatigue themselves over the faint, crabbed writing. His first intention was evidently not to open it, for he had all but laid it in a cosey corner in the despatch-box; but second thoughts prevailed. Perhaps it was a sudden instinct, perhaps a mere idle restlessness: at all events, his thin white fingers at last did slowly untie the string, and the packet was opened.

It was a curious sound which in about five minutes later roused Ethel from her deep reverie, and made her start.

It was not a call. He had not mentioned her name. It was not a cry, nor a scream, nor even a groan: it was more like the sound of a shudder,—a long, low, shivering shudder. She turned round.

Her guardian was standing at the table, and his face was white and ghastly. He looked like a man petrified, frozen. Before him were some papers, upon which his eyes were bent eagerly, devouringly. Ethel was at his side in a moment. "Mr. O'Neil, what is it? What has happened?" she cried. And to rouse him, for it seemed as though he hardly heard her, she put her hand on his arm, and shook it almost roughly.

"What has happened? Oh! what is it?" she cried over and over again.

He made no reply; but he slowly raised his eyes and looked at her. Ethel never forgot that moment, that look. It was piteous, piteous! It was the look of a man in whose heart hope has just died, and despair been born.

"What is it? You must tell me, Mr. O'Neil: you must!" Ethel cried, terrified out of her senses now at last.

At all events, she had roused him. Slowly, and like a person in a dream, he passed his hand across his forehead.

"Something has happened very strange,—inexplicable in fact," he said. "I can't make it out. I don't understand it. I—I—"

All at once a deep flush mounted to his face "Such villainy! such deep, malignant villainy!" he murmured, and with a sigh of exhaustion he fell back upon the sofa.

Ethel was at her wits'-ends: she thought he was going to faint. But he did not faint, though he grew white again, and closed his eyes. But presently he opened them, and

met hers, terrified, bewildered, fixed upon him.

"What is it?" she cried again passionately.

But before he had answered her, — before even he had opened his lips to speak, — Ethel's question had received its reply: she knew what had happened.

Knew it by one of those swift, clear, irresistible inspirations which strike the brain now and then, making darkness bright, seizing the intricate knot of the most perplexed mystery, and unravelling it in an instant. Her eyes had followed those of her guardian, and had seen lying upon the table a few scattered sheets of blank paper, and by their side the familiar piece of silk ribbon which had held them together.

"The letters!" she cried then. "The letters! O Mr. O'Neil!"

They looked at one another in silence. Neither could speak. It was horrible. Ethel felt the room swimming round and round: the floor seemed to rock beneath her. Her brain was on fire; but it was not stunned or confused. Better perhaps would it have been for her if it had, — less painful, less cruel, than the terrible clearness with which the truth stared her in the face. "Oh!" she gasped at last, "she must have done it, — Madame O'Neil must have stolen the letters, and put those blank sheets in their place. What a fool, what an idiot, I was! Oh the wicked, wicked woman!"

She had not meant it for a confession or a self-accusation; yet, now that it was made, it sounded like one, even in her own ears, — a strange, dreadful confession. What did it sound like in those of her guardian? All at once he seemed to awake, — to wake out of a dream.

"But they were in your possession, — in yours, Miss Mildmay. For God's sake what do you mean?" he asked.

She pushed her hair back from her forehead, and tried to think. Alas! there was no need to think, — no need to put two and two together, or to seek for the missing links of a chain of evidence.

"Oh! why did you ever give them to me?" she said passionately. "I did not want them. I wanted not to take them or read them. I"— Then she broke down. "What will you say to me? what will you think of me?" she gasped. "But I will go to her. I will force them from her. I promise you, Mr. O'Neil, that I will force them from her," she cried resolutely.

Her guardian had risen, and was standing leaning against the mantle-piece. He seemed to have grown strangely calm. A

curious change had passed over him. "Force them from her!" he repeated slowly, and with a faint, peculiar smile. "Miss Mildmay, you are mad, or very foolish. They have been destroyed long ago. You don't know Madame O'Neil, then?"

Ethel covered her face with her hands. "Oh, what is to be done? — what is to be done?" she cried.

There was a minute's silence. Mr. O'Neil again approached the table, and carefully examined the papers. One piece of writing had been left. It was the Irish-woman's dying deposition, which had been sworn to by living witnesses, and within which Mrs. Irwin's letters had been folded, — had been folded, that is, on the day when Mr. O'Neil had confided the packet to his mother to give it to his ward; but now, in their place, nothing but a few blank sheets of note-paper were to be found.

Ethel did not know then, nor did she ever know, that her guardian was merely gaining time to steady his voice, gaining courage to ask calmly the terrible question which hung on his lips. At last he made it. "Or rather what *has* been done?" he inquired slowly. "How has it been done? Miss Mildmay, you know: will you tell me?"

Eagerly she began. There was but the one way, — there was but the one possibility of accounting for the extraordinary event. It must have been that morning when Mr. O'Neil had been so terribly ill, and that his sister-in-law had forced herself into the house. "I was sent for when they thought you were dying, and Mrs. O'Neil had fainted," she tried to explain as clearly and steadily as she could (but in truth it was a sorry failure, and her words were almost unintelligible); "and I flew out of the room, leaving her alone in it, and entirely forgetting that the packet of letters lay in that Indian box over there on the console. Afterwards I recollect it, and came back in a great fright, with an idea in my head that she might possibly have discovered them, — that, at all events, it was an imprudent thing to leave her alone in the room which contained them."

"Rather," observed Mr. O'Neil, with the same peculiar smile.

But Ethel was too absorbed with her recollections to notice the interruption. "And I at once examined the box, and found them quite safe," she went on eagerly, — "at least, I imagined them to be quite safe; but I did not open the packet (I never opened it from that day to this); but I took it to my room and locked it up; for though Mrs. O'Neil had said, only a

day or two before, that the Indian box was a secure place for it, I thought on reflection, that, so long as they were in my possession, I would be happier in having them under lock and key. Ever since, they have been in the press in my room. Nobody can have touched the box, — nobody. I kept the key myself. It must have been that morning that she did it. It must have been!" Ethel concluded in a tone of miserable conviction.

A confused, bewildered little narrative, to which Mr. O'Neil listened attentively, and with keen, searching eyes. Somehow or other those eyes of his troubled Ethel strangely just then, made her breath come shorter, and the words seem harder to utter. When she paused, "But how did my sister-in-law know of the existence of such letters?" he inquired slowly. "Somebody must have told her. When that poor, wretched woman died in America, she assured me, and I believed her, that Madame O'Neil believed them to have been destroyed long ago. Knowing well what a clever, unscrupulous woman my sister-in-law is, and how she would stop at no means to attain an end, I had meant (and had fancied, too, that I was successful) to guard the knowledge of their existence jealously from her."

"I never told her," Ethel cried. "Never! I could swear"—

But all at once a sudden recollection pierced her brain, and she paused abruptly. She had not told Madame O'Neil, it was true; but was it true that she had not told the count?

Her guardian looked at her steadily, pitilessly. "You did not tell her?" he repeated eagerly. "You did not betray me, then? O Ethel! what is it?"

The girl had grown suddenly white as death. Her hands convulsively clasped the back of a chair: otherwise she must have fallen. "I did not tell her — no," she said in a low, hollow voice; "but I did tell Count O'Neil. Yes, I remember now that I did. And he — he must have told her!"

There was an awful, cruel silence. Ethel pitied her guardian then, more even than she pitied herself; for she saw, she felt, that she had dealt him the cruellest blow that it was in her power to deal.

But he was strong and brave, and knew how to bear it well. There was a sharp struggle, a desperate, proud fight for self-command. For a moment he hid his face: when he lifted it again, it was quite calm and very white. "You told the count?" he repeated. "You had seen him, then?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"Twice."

"After I had fallen ill?"

"No. The first time was the evening before, — the evening that we walked home together from the Widow Moore's cottage. We passed him on the road, and afterwards he came to me when I was walking in the avenue alone. The second time was the next day."

She seemed to take a cruel pleasure in the full details of her confession.

"And you did not think fit to tell me at the time?" Mr. O'Neil inquired gently.

"He begged of me not to do so. I could not refuse. I did not know how to refuse him." •

A little pause. Then she went closer to him, and looked up in his face pleadingly.

"Mr. O'Neil, will you forgive me? I am sorry," Ethel said.

This was too much. The time was gone by when a soft word or a deprecating glance could soften him and bring him to her feet in an instant. There is such a thing as the last straw on the camel's back; and his ward's sudden, sweet humility was the overflowing drop of bitterness in her guardian's cup. He gave her a stony glance.

"Forgive you! But there is nothing to forgive," he said icily. "I quite understand that you did not feel yourself at liberty to betray the secrecy which your — your friend wished to preserve. On that score there is nothing more to be said. About those unfortunate letters" — He paused.

"They can be recovered: they *must* be recovered," Ethel exclaimed.

He laughed a short impatient laugh. "Absurd, quite absurd, Miss Mildmay! Of course they are destroyed. At all events, my eyes will never again see them. No, no. Let us look things in the face. That mischief is irreparable."

"And I am accountable for it!" Ethel said.

He did not contradict her, but merely laughed again. "Every thing is fair in love and war," he said. "I suppose you considered yourself justified in acting as you did. Well, you have your reward; and I may as well let you enjoy it to the full. Miss Mildmay, I am not quite sure yet; but it is my opinion, my strong opinion, that my last chance of Castle Garvagh is gone now."

He spoke with calm recklessness; and there was recklessness in his face and eyes, as well as in his voice.

Ethel recoiled from him as though he had

given her a hard blow. Suddenly she grew crimson.

"Mr. O'Neil!" she gasped.

He looked at her defiantly.

"Yes."

"Mr. O'Neil, you don't mean to say, you *can't* mean to say, that you believe that I have been guilty of any thing but unparable carelessness, that,"—her voice faltered and fell,—"that I betrayed your secret knowingly and willingly; that I was an accomplice to"—

"A sort of sleeping partner in the business; eh, Miss Mildmay?" and he laughed lightly.

"You do believe it, then?"

He hesitated, and changed color. "I have not accused you," he began.

"You do believe it?" she persisted.

He turned from her sharply. Truth to tell, he could not bear the indignant, passionate reproach of her eyes.

"I bring no accusations," he repeated unsteadily. Then he gave her a quick glance. "Ethel, I do *not* believe it," he said with sudden tenderness. "But—but—oh, my God! I am a ruined man! And he buried his face in his hands.

"But you did believe it, you actually did; you really believed me capable of such treachery," the girl went on with tremulous vehemence. "Mr. O'Neil, I pity you from the bottom of my heart; but never, never, no, never, so long as I live, will I forgive you!"

Her passion struck him dumb, rooted him to the spot: he could not speak nor stir; and with stony, stupid eyes he watched her, as, with a swift step, she turned from him and left the room.



CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN hour or two later, at luncheon, said Ethel to Mrs. O'Neil, "I am going to ride this afternoon;" and she said it with the peculiar intonation of a person who knows that the proposition she has advanced will infallibly meet with contradiction. And true enough it did.

"To ride, child! Nonsense! On such a day as this? I won't hear of it." And the old lady seemed to consider the matter settled.

"It is a dreadful day, gloomy and dreary and— But it is not actually raining, and I am going to ride," repeated Miss Mildmay calmly.

Mrs. O'Neil peered at her through her spectacles. The young lady's serene obstinacy perplexed her; but it irritated her too.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, child. Bless my soul! what are you thinking of? You have got a cold as it is; and, if it is not raining now, it will, beyond a doubt, pour down in an hour. Don't be silly, Ethel!"

"I am not silly; but I must ride. I want to ride. I want to go over to Castle Garvagh," replied Miss Mildmay in tones clear as a bell.

"To Castle Garvagh!"

Mrs. O'Neil looked simply aghast. She was incapable of uttering a word.

"Yes, to Castle Garvagh. I have particular business there; and the days are so short, and the ride is so long, that I think I had better start at once. Will you excuse me, Mrs. O'Neil?" And, without waiting for an answer, she pushed her plate from her, rose from the table and left the room.

A dead silence followed her exit. Mrs. O'Neil sat, the hand conveying a glass of wine to her lips suspended in the air, her mouth open, her breath taken away with amazement. Her son seemed to be busy with his plate; but somehow it appeared that his attention was more anxiously directed towards cutting its contents into tiny morsels than towards conveying them to his mouth. As to Ethel's plate, her food lay upon it untouched. She had hardly eaten any thing. Suddenly Mrs. O'Neil became conscious of it all, became distinctly aware that something very wrong and terrible must have happened; and of course it could be but the one thing.

"O Arthur!" she cried, and her fair face flushed crimson: "O Arthur! have you really, really, done it?" And the old lady's voice shook with a hardly suppressed sob.

He looked up at her with a smile. "Done what, mother?"

"Done *it*,—asked that girl to marry you. And she has refused,—the audacious child has refused!" she gasped.

"No, she has not," very quietly said.

"What?"

"She has *not* refused to marry me. I have not asked her; and I don't mean to ask her, either: so she never will refuse. There, mother!" And he spoke and laughed a little impatiently.

"My goodness! Then, what is the matter?" she demanded testily.

"Nothing in the world. Nothing is the matter. Why should you think it?"

"Because you don't mean to ask her,"

repeated his mother curiously. "But only yesterday, Arthur, you told me — you know you did."

"Told you what?" he interrupted hastily. "Told you that I was fool enough to care for her? But a man may now and then rhapsodize to his mother without meaning every thing he says to be looked upon in the light of gospel truth," pursued Mr. O'Neil with a careless little laugh. "I do care for her, I suppose. She is attractive and pretty and — Put it out of your head, mother. It is all nonsense, utter nonsense, wild folly," concluded Mr. O'Neil a little vaguely, and standing up suddenly.

His mother rose too. Appetites were nothing to boast of that day at Mount Druid, at all events.

"Then you are not thinking of marrying her? You don't want to marry her, Arthur?" the old lady inquired eagerly. "What does the girl mean? What on earth does she mean by such conduct?" she exclaimed suddenly, as the sound of horses' hoofs made themselves heard upon the gravel outside, and Eclipse appeared saddled, coming round to the door.

Mr. O'Neil looked out of the window. "It is a dreadful day, gloomy and dreary," he remarked, exactly repeating the words which his ward had made use of a few minutes ago. "But still it is not actually raining. Miss Mildmay is strong, mother. I dare say a ride won't hurt her."

"It will hurt her. She will get drenched, I know she will. Besides, what on earth is bringing the child to Castle Garvagh?" she broke out indignantly. "How had she face — the impudence to tell me that she was going there? I will forbid her. I will order her to do nothing of the sort." And Mrs. O'Neil attempted to throw up the sash of the window, doubtless intending to issue her commands on the spot to Ethel, who at that very moment appeared equipped upon the steps. But Mr. O'Neil gently held back her arm.

"No, don't, mother. It is not worth while. Let her do as she likes."

"As she likes, Arthur!"

"Yes. Remember that in another fortnight, or a little more, our — my authority will have expired. It is not worth while exercising it for the short time that remains. Yes, let her do as she likes," he repeated, shortly and rather sternly.

"But it is shameful, disgraceful!" gasped Mrs. O'Neil. "The idea of her braving us to our very faces, and going after those people! Arthur, you should not allow it: you really should not. Ah!" as Ethel, light as a feather, jumped into her saddle,

and gathered up her reins in preparation to depart. "And on the horse you gave her too! Actually making use of your own present to her to insult you!" she concluded, reaching this climax with a groan.

He laughed rather dryly and bitterly. There certainly was an element of the ludicrous in Miss Mildmay's audacity; but to judge from the curious expression of his eyes, following her as she cantered briskly away down the avenue, it was composed of one or two other elements as well.

"Well, it is better that she should do whatever she does do openly and frankly than deceive us. You will allow that, at least, mother, will you not?" he said carelessly. "And there is nothing else for her to ride but Eclipse, you know. I dare say, if there were, that Eclipse would be left in her stables readily enough," he added with another little laugh, and half under his breath.

And, indeed, his surmise was perfectly correct. Ethel, bounding away through the chill, damp air upon her steed, felt her cheeks burn as she remembered whose gift the pretty horse had been, and, with a strange instinct, guessed the thoughts which were at that moment passing through her guardian's mind. But, as he himself had said, there was nothing else for her to ride; and so what could she do but pocket her dignity and her pride, and ride Eclipse? At all events, it would be for the last time. Never again would she ride her; no, never again. Never again would she put it in her guardian's power to confer an obligation upon her. Never again would she owe him a pleasure, a joy, a gladness. Never again would she permit him to humble her by overpowering her with kindness, nor to heap coals of fire upon her head by practising the Christian maxim of returning, as he had always insisted upon returning, good for evil, charity and love for injury and rebellion. No, never again. Miss Mildmay had told him to-day that she never would forgive him, and she had told him only what she believed to be the strict truth. She would not forgive him! She could almost have laughed, only that she was actually crying, — crying hot, blinding tears at the foolish, mocking words. She would not forgive him! And he — what had he to forgive her? or rather, what had he not to forgive her? Ah, this was the thought that was too intolerable to bear, — the thought that trampled her silly pride in the dust. It was this thought which cut through Ethel's heart like a cold, sharp knife, and with its keen, stinging pain banished every other thought from her mind.

"When things come to their worst, they begin to mend." After all, Miss Mildmay was young; and presently, when she was out in the wide, bleak country, bravely facing a chilly, damp wind, on her road to Castle Garvagh, and urging Eclipse to her speediest paces, her spirits began to rise just ever so little, and this consoling proverb recurred to her. Things indeed seemed to be at their very worst now. Let her think as hard as ever she could, she could not think of any thing worse that could possibly happen. It seemed to her as though Fortune must have exhausted her persecutions, and that, even if she were willing, she was powerless to work greater woe and mischief than she had already done. From despair springs hope; and strange to say that Ethel began to hope now. What she hoped for, it would have been hard to say; but hope she did. For, otherwise, why would she now be braving wind and weather? why would she have incensed Mrs. O'Neil, and insulted her guardian (as she knew she had done, and as she wanted to do)? Why, if some spark of hope was not lurking at the bottom of her heart, would she now be sallying forth on this wild-goose, dreary, dreadful expedition to Castle Garvagh?

Why, indeed! Somehow if her spirits had, during her ride, risen a little, and her courage made a bold front, they both sank again as she approached the end of her journey. She had ridden so fast, that she even surprised herself, not to speak of the panting groom behind and the panting horse beneath her, by the quickness with which she reached Castle Garvagh. Here she was already at the great gaunt gate; and here was the long, straight avenue, pointing, as it were, sternly and forbiddingly to the huge mass of gray building just, but only just, visible in the dim distance. Ethel went on boldly,—outwardly that is, for inwardly she was a coward,—and a strangely unpleasant sinking was at her heart. On she went briskly cantering, and never drawing rein till she had reached about midway up the avenue, where a narrower avenue diverged to the right from the main one, plunging into a thick, tangled wood, and winding beneath overhanging trees and greenery. Here Ethel did pause at last, and for an instant hesitated, debating whether she would pursue the straight road before her, or turn into the side one. But she had already all but made up her mind, and it took her only an instant to decide. Then she took the path to the right.

It was necessary to go slowly now. The

avenue was a narrow one, and evidently neglected, and but little used. Here and there it was almost choked with trailing branches, and weeds and grass flourished in full liberty. In some places, indeed, the path was barely distinguishable, and Ethel had to keep her eyes open to see it. Eclipse was docile and well trained, and she picked her way daintily along it; but she did not like it for all that, and not seldom cocked her pretty white ears, and started and shied at some protruding bramble, or at the shivering sounds of the falling leaves which the wailing wind was carrying to the ground in the woody depths on either side. For a little while, they went on thus, cautiously and slowly. Then, when the path seemed almost to have hopelessly lost itself, it suddenly cleared, and emerged within a few yards of a small gray, gloomy house, to the hall-door of which a flagged, weed-grown footway led.

What a gloomy house it was! Never, even on the brightest day, with a blue heaven above, and the forest green and fragrant around, could it have been any thing else but gloomy. But to-day, beneath that dull leaden sky, and buried in the midst of those bare, gray trees, it was the saddest, dullest, most hopeless-looking habitation one could imagine. Ethel shuddered as she contemplated it, and marvelled how two daughters of fair, sunny, joyous France could survive a single week's residence in it. Yet Mrs. Irwin had lived there many years of her life,—for it was her husband's home,—and was actually living there now. So was her sister, Madame O'Neil. Turned out by the old lord's capricious, imperious will from the castle, they had been forced to, or at all events had chosen to, take refuge here.

It was a mysterious, uncanny place, that looked a secret in itself,—a sort of place in which one could not suppose it possible to laugh, or even to smile, or almost to talk above one's breath. Ethel pictured to herself the two women within, with dark, crafty, silent Denis Irwin to keep them company when now and then he was able to escape from his arduous duties over at the great house. How could they bear it? How, at least, could Madame O'Neil—accustomed to sunny climes, and bright, cheerful houses, and the exciting bustle of busy, active life—bear being buried alive in this silent, dreary tomb? Miss Mildmay felt that she could hardly bear it herself for another moment; and with a quick, impetuous determination, a sort of desperate resolve not to let her courage fail her, and to go through with the work she had under-

taken, she jumped off her horse, and hastily approached the door.

It was closed. Moreover, the bell was broken, and the wire hung helplessly from the handle. There was no knocker, and the girl looked round in vain for a sign of life. But she was a young lady of determination, as we know; and, having once made up her mind to get into the house, get into it we may be quite sure she will. And so, after a brief consultation with the groom, who was young and stupid, and could throw no light whatever on the situation beyond asseverating "that he was mortal sure that there was not a living craythur in the place," Miss Mildmay raised her small, tender hands, and began battering with all her might against the door. No response. But repulse only made her the more resolved. Presently her hands got quite sore and stiff, and her breath came a little short with her exertions. In vain. It was like knocking at the entrance of a tomb. Nothing but dead echoes seemed to reply. Yet—yes—here at last was coming an answering sound,—the sound of a slow step, and of an uncertain, fumbling hand. And then the door opened, and Mrs. Irwin's pale face appeared.

Neither woman was surprised (for Ethel had been half-prepared to be met by Mrs. Irwin, and Mrs. Irwin had already surveyed her visitor from behind a screening curtain): yet both started back at the sight of the other,—Miss Mildmay with a start of pure fright and uervousness; Mrs. Irwin with one deliberately and carefully acted. The little woman colored with a slight natural color, however. "Miss Mildmay!" she exclaimed. "Is it possible, is it possible! Ah, you have been caught, doubtless, by the rain, and desire shelter. It is a poor place you have come to,—a poor, dull place, but I can offer you shelter at least;" and she laughed nervously. "Ah, there is the rain!" as Mrs. O'Neil's prediction was verified, and some heavy drops fell,—"there is the rain! and it looks, too, as though it were more than a shower. Certainly it will continue all day, and all the evening now."

Mrs. Irwin, in spite of her offer of shelter, seemed, truth to tell, but very little inclined to give it; for she stood at the entrance of the narrow little hall, and made no sign of ushering her visitor in.

But Miss Mildmay advanced boldly. "It is not shelter I want, Mrs. Irwin," she said. "I want to see Madame O'Neil. I have ridden all the way over from Mount Druid to see her. Will you tell her that I am here?"

She spoke flurriedly, and a little pleadingly too, as though she had a presentiment that her request would be refused.

Mrs. Irwin looked at her hesitatingly. "My sister is not very well to-day," she replied after a little pause. "She is suffering from nervous headache, and is— But will you not walk into the drawing-room and rest yourself a little?" she invited her at last.

Ethel followed her into the dark, cheerless little room in which, though empty now, she fancied there were traces of its having only just been vacated. A fire, the one cheerful object visible, was burning briskly; and drawn up closely to it were a couple of low easy-chairs, apparently holding friendly gossip together. Ethel gave them a suspicious glance. Something told her that Madame O'Neil had been sitting in one of them five minutes ago.

"What can I get you?" Mrs. Irwin was inquiring hospitably,— "a glass of wine, or a cup of tea? Something you must certainly take; and I will, with pleasure, lend you a waterproof and an umbrella to protect you during your long ride home."

She was nervous and flurried, and ill at ease. Ethel felt her own courage rise in proportion to the discomfiture of her companion. "It has been a long ride here," she said, giving her a steady glance; "and as you may suppose, Mrs. Irwin, I have not taken it without an object. I want to see your sister. Will you not let her know that I am here?"

"My sister is not well. I think she will see no visitors," Mrs. Irwin replied, diligently poking the fire. "I am very sorry, Miss Mildmay, as she will be too when she hears you have been here. But her head aches badly. It is impossible, I fear."

"Only for five minutes. I will not ask to see her for longer. Mrs. Irwin, I must—I really must see her."

The Frenchwoman shook her head. "She is in great pain, and is in bed. Miss Mildmay, I am truly sorry. But I can carry a message, perhaps. Will not that do? And what will you have? —a cup of tea? I will see that it is at once prepared." And she seemed inclined to escape from the room.

But Ethel would not let her go. "I will take nothing, thank you; nothing. I only want to see Madame O'Neil. Why will you not allow me to see her, Mrs. Irwin?"

"*Mon Dieu!* She is suffering, and sees no one,—no one. Hardly have I been in her room all day. Noise disturbs her, and brings on the pain. What will you? My sister is strong, and enjoys excellent health;

but she is subject to these attacks occasionally."

"I must see her," Ethel repeated imperturbably. Strange to say, she had not the remotest, faintest doubt that Madame O'Neil's illness was an invention of her facile imagination.

"I must see her. It is absolutely necessary."

"Then it is a matter of great importance, — too important to trust me with a message, is it? Well, I regret it not. For my part, I detest mysteries," Mrs. Irwin said with a forced laugh.

"It is no mystery. You know my errand as well as I do myself: Madame O'Neil knows it too. Mrs. Irwin, have you not enough on your conscience already?" she broke out. "Will you not save yourself this last crime? Will you not help me to get back those letters that have been stolen from Mount Druid? Yes, stolen; meanly, shamefully stolen!" And in her excitement the girl seized Mrs. Irwin's hands, and pressed them convulsively,

The pale little woman changed color, and trembled; but her deep sunken eyes looked defiant and resolute.

"Letters! Stolen!" she repeated. "I protest I know not what you mean; no, not in the least. It seems a strange speech that you have made,—very strange, and insulting even. Madame O'Neil will perhaps understand: I will go and ask her. Is that your message which you wish me to repeat, Miss Mildmay?"

"Ask her to let me see her,—only for five minutes, only for five minutes. That cannot hurt her surely. She forced herself upon me when Mr. O'Neil was dying," she added indigantly, "and surely she cannot refuse to see me now."

But this remonstrance was addressed to empty air. Mrs. Irwin had left the room — fairly run away. Mrs. O'Neil had been right in judging Mary Anne Irwin to be but a poor creature,—one of those beings weak in every thing save the power of bearing in dull submission a lifelong load of guilt and misery, who are sent into the world to be the passive tools of superior minds. All her life she had been a slave, and now the chains were too firmly riveted to be broken. But she was a slave only. She could obey and submit; but she was incapable of personal action or of self-guidance.

And so now she ran away from Ethel's eager, flashing eyes, and vehement determination. The girl sat impatiently awaiting her return, counting the minutes, listening for a sound. In vain. The house was

as still and silent as though no passionately-beating hearts, and anxious minds, and resolute wills were in it. She had not to wait long. In a very few minutes the door opened noiselessly, and Mrs. Irwin glided in.

"It is impossible. My sister is sleeping," she said. "She has taken some drops to make her sleep, and I could not venture to disturb her."

Ethel flushed. "I will wait," she said shortly.

"Wait, Miss Mildmay! But it is four o'clock already, and it grows dark. Surely that is folly, madness! Besides, Madame O'Neil will now probably sleep for several hours."

Ethel looked out. True enough, the idea of waiting was mere folly. The evening was setting in wet and wild; and, if she meant to return to Mount Druid at all, there was no time to lose.

"Mrs. Irwin!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning round on her, "do you know the dreadful thing that has been done,—done by your sister? Why, I saw the letters myself,—*your* letters,—read them with my own eyes; and now, and now, they are—Where are they, Mrs. Irwin?"

But, if she had vaguely hoped to throw the little woman off her guard, she was disappointed. In the dim light Ethel saw her color, but that was all.

"Letters — *my* letters!" she repeated. "I tell you, Miss Mildmay, that I do not even know what you are alluding to. In business-matters I never interfere. I leave all that to my husband and sister; and I suppose it is something about business which is distressing you. Can you not write to my sister? or, better still, in a day or two she will probably be quite recovered, and able to see you, and then all can be settled and explained. Pray calm yourself, Miss Mildmay, and you will see that what I propose is quite reasonable."

Ethel was defeated. She knew she was. From this pale, dark, timorous, crushed little woman nothing was to be extracted, and she could not break into Madame O'Neil's bedroom. What could she do? Nothing — absolutely nothing. Half an hour ago full of foolish hope, now a blank wall of despair seemed to have sprung up right in front of her.

"Is Count O'— Is the count here?" she inquired suddenly.

Mrs. Irwin smiled,—a rather disagreeable smile. "Oh, no! He is at the castle with his uncle. Lord O'Neil is so attached to him, that he cannot let him out of his sight for hardly a minute. Perhaps you

would like to call at the castle, Miss Mildmay," she inquired a little satirically. The shaft made Ethel's blood tingle; but she would not notice it. "It is too late for me to do any thing but get home," she replied with dignity, and gathering up the skirts of her habit. "I have a long ride before me." And when Mrs. Irwin, feeling now secure of her victory, and relapsing into obsequiousness, again pressed some refreshment on her, "No," she said frankly. "I will take nothing from you,—nothing. It is open war between us now, Mrs. Irwin,—open war. You may tell your sister so. Tell her—pray do—that my eyes are opened at last,—thoroughly opened. I would not taste a morsel of food in this house, not if it were to save my life."

And with this bold challenge falling from her lips in clear, ringing tones, Miss Mildmay marched out of the room without a word of farewell.

A bold challenge, indeed, but a very vain one. Oh, how vain she felt it to be, when once more she found herself upon Eclipse's back, and with her face turned homeward! Open war!—yes, it was open war. But the victory was already on one side; and the other was hopelessly, ignominiously defeated. What was the meaning of war when the battle was already fought out and lost? Oh, what a wretched, dreary ride the girl had of it home! It was pouring rain; and the wind was howling and sighing, and the black night was settling down upon the bleak, wild bogs. It was pitch dark, and she was drenched through and through by the time Mount Druid was reached at last. Oh, if she had only been happy! if only she had not this dreadful heartache, this intolerable weight upon her brain! If she were only happy; how joyously and pleasant the red, warm lights of Mount Druid would welcome her! how thankful and glad she would be to pass from the wretched, cold outside world into this bright, cheerful home! But Ethel was quite sure now, at all events, that she never could be happy again. She had thought so more than once before, and had found out that she was mistaken; but this time there could be no mistake: she had quite made up her mind upon the subject.

There seemed to be a little stir going on in the house when she arrived. Hannah, helping her to take off her soaked things, and bemoaning her sorry plight, informed her of the cause of it. Mr. O'Neil was going up to town by the mail-train that night. The covered car was ordered for nine o'clock to take him to the station.

Ethel felt dismayed, relieved, sorry, glad, all at once. But when she remembered the state of his health, and the dreadful night it was, she felt frightened and sorry, and nothing else.

Needless to say what were his mother's sentiments with regard to the proposed journey. But she had exhausted every argument, every entreaty,—even the entreaty of being allowed to accompany him,—in vain. "I am only going for a few days on business. You know that I had always intended to run up for a few days before Christmas," he had replied to her. "And I would rather be alone, mother; I really would."

In short, it was one of the rare occasions when Mr. O'Neil's determination was proof against even his mother's arguments to shake it.

Once only before he left that night did he speak directly to Ethel. It was when he was bidding her good-by. His mother was out of the room looking after his wraps; and they were alone.

"Don't tell my mother about—about this unfortunate occurrence," he said to her. "It would break her heart, and—I would rather she did not know. Please don't tell her, Miss Mildmay."

Ethel was very pale and calm and cold. "I will not tell her," she promised.

Mr. O'Neil gave her a quick glance; but the girl's face was a riddle. It baffled him. He could not read it. "Good-by, Miss Mildmay," he said after a little pause.

And she laid her hand in his for an instant, and said "Good-by" as calmly as though she was not wishing herself dead a hundred times over rather than standing there looking at him. The next instant he was gone.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IT sometimes happens that little ills prove a wonderful comfort when they happen to come to us in the midst of great ones. Ethel found that a little ill that came to her just now in the shape of a bad cold, which kept her for the next few days a close prisoner to her bed, was rather a pleasant little event than otherwise.

It was only a cold, but a severe one. And everybody knows that a severe cold prostrates both body and mind for the time being, and renders both equally incapable of exertion.

Mrs. O'Neil was irritable, triumphant.

"I told you that you would catch your death of cold, child, by insisting on riding out in such weather," she said; "and was I not right? But please yourself. It is easy to see that you care precious little about pleasing anybody else."

This was a severe speech, and severely spoken. Ethel was weak and ill and unhappy; and her eyes filled up with tears as she heard it. But the old lady either did not or would not see them. She was angry with the girl, angry and hurt and aggrieved. First of all, she was morally certain, that, in one way or another, Ethel had displeased her guardian, and that her conduct was responsible for this mad running-away of his from Mount Druid. Secondly, the girl's obstinacy and audacity in paying that visit to Castle Garvah spoke its own language sufficiently clearly. Thirdly, she felt that she was being kept in the dark,—excluded from her son's confidence as well as that of Miss Mildmay. Surely here were wrongs and grievances enough: the old lady's curiosity was on tenter-hooks, her heart was bursting,—sore and bursting. No wonder that her temper broke down a little, and that sharp words escaped from her now and then. On this occasion, having made this cruel little speech, and administered a cup of delicious hot gruel nicely sweetened (by way of an antidote doubtless) to her patient, she hastened to confide her woes to Flaherty's ever-sympathetic bosom.

"She knocks the men about like ninepins, Flaherty; she does indeed," the poor lady groaned mournfully.

And the faithful Flaherty shook her head, and pursed up her mouth, and venomously gave it as her solemn opinion that her master's ward ought to be sent to school to learn to behave herself.

And meanwhile Ethel lay languid, weary, and hopeless in bed. She was glad to be ill; glad to have the excuse of lying still; glad to be left alone in a quiet, darkened room; glad not to have to speak or stir; glad to be let be miserable at her ease. Now that inaction was forced upon her, inaction seemed to be as good a mode of action as any other. Where was the use of being active? Madame O'Neil still continued ill, at least she said so. The evening of the day of her fruitless attempt to see her she had written to her, and in due time her letter had received an answer. To Ethel's accusations, a distinct, indignant denial was returned. To her prayers and entreaties, a few cold words were vouchsafed. Mrs. Irwin had faithfully, it appeared, transmitted her parting message, and Madame O'Neil had taken up the

gauntlet. It was war between them now; and both belligerents pretty well knew who, in such a strife, was likely to come off second best.

Madame O'Neil would not see her for the present, at all events. That was clear. She said she was too unwell to do so; but she promised an interview, if Miss Mildmay particularly desired it, so soon as she should feel herself sufficiently recovered. From Madame O'Neil, however, Ethel knew well enough how little there was to be hoped. As she had told Mrs. Irwin, her eyes were thoroughly open now,—opened wide at last in spite of themselves; opened to see with what an opponent she had been mad enough to enter the lists, and to know what an enemy she had so rashly challenged.

Perhaps those few days of involuntary repose taught Ethel one or two homely and useful lessons. At least, they gave her ample time for reflection,—that sharp but wholesome medicine,—when reflection means regretting past mistakes, encouraging humility and self-distrust, and teaching us, as it taught Ethel then, that, on the road through life, it is as well now and then to accept the assistance of a helping hand, and to listen to a friendly word of advice when it is offered us. Poor Ethel! She is scolding herself, so we will spare her; her own troubles and perplexities and regrets being the most eloquent sermon that could be preached to her. Let us only trust that she listened to it weekly, and profited of it diligently, and so learnt through experience to become a better and a wiser woman than when we first made acquaintance with her.

Reflection! Indeed, she had plenty of that, poor child! She reflected till her brain ached, and she could think no more,—thought of the past and of the future too. But if from the former at least a moral lesson was to be derived, what advantage or what consolation could be extracted from the future?

It seemed a blank. No ray of light would dawn upon it; not a single bright spot could she discern in it, till at last one day, when she was nearly well again, and up and dressed, a ray of light did certainly dawn upon it, and a wild, foolish hope darted into her bosom, and illuminated her brain, where indeed it had been lying in a dormant state for the last few days, though she had half unconsciously refused to look it boldly in the face.

It was Christmas Eve, and a bright, white Christmas Eve it was. True enough, dark shadows had treacherously stolen into Mount Druid, and had set themselves down between fond friends and loving hearts,—

stolen in like crafty thieves to rob the precious flowers of joy and trust. Yet a bright Christmas is a happy thing in itself, and the old house was alive with a furtitious outward semblance of cheerfulness; servants were in good humor, charities were being dispensed, hungry mouths gladly fed. Mr. O'Neil, too, was coming home. Altogether that Christmas Eve was less gloomy, at all events, than the days that had gone before; and Ethel, looking out at the white world glistening in the unwonted gush of sunshine, and thinking a certain great thought which was growing apace in her brain, felt a vague faint thrill of something like gladness once more.

Her guardian, however, thought her looking pale and sad enough when he saw her that evening. Her cold had made her thin; and blue lines were under her eyes. But she made nothing of it all, and cut his anxious inquiries short by professing herself quite well,—cut them short rather abruptly and stiffly, as though they either displeased her or embarrassed her. As to him, his journey seemed to have been of service to him. He looked better than a week ago,—better in health, that is; though an indescribable alteration seemed to have taken place in his appearance, which was perhaps not entirely an improvement. Ethel wondered what it was. He looked stronger; and there was more color in his face, and energy and activity in his walk, and more tone and strength in his voice. For some time she could not make out what the change was; but suddenly it flashed across her, and she was able to define it. It was that he seemed to have grown older,—ten years older. His hair was grayer, and there were new lines of thought or anxiety or grief upon his forehead.

Ethel counted them one by one, and felt that each one, as she did so, printed itself over again upon her heart.

They met very calmly and quietly, with perfect outward composure on both sides. Mr. O'Neil was evidently quite resolved to obliterate the past, and to start a new line of conduct towards his ward. He was friendly and kind, and cold and guardian-like. He had forgiven her. Ethel knew that he was at least trying to forgive her. There it was! But she would not, for all the world contained, be forgiven on those terms. Better frank resentment and eternal war than such a magnanimous pardon, such a hollow, miserable truce as this.

Yet there was no help for it. For all her wild, interior rebellion, she was, in spite of herself, compelled to follow the lead which he gave her, and to respect the bar-

riers within which he had calmly and sternly intrenched himself. He rarely spoke to her. They were never alone together. Ethel was high-spirited and brave, and not easily downcast; but gradually her heart sank, and in secret she pined and withered from day to day beneath the touch of Mr. O'Neil's calm, serene coldness.

It was on the day after Christmas Day that Mr. O'Neil informed his mother that he was contemplating another journey.

"The truth is," he told her, "that Dr. ——, whom I saw, you know, in town, said that it would be madness for me to risk the spring in Ireland this year. He says I am tolerably right at present, but that a few months of real sunshine are absolutely necessary for me."

Mrs. O'Neil listened to the announcement in gloomy silence. Poor old lady! It was useless pretending any longer. This miserable feint of living day after day as though nothing were the matter when everybody knew and felt that something, and something dreadful too, was the matter, was rapidly becoming impossible. She, too, for a little while had played her rôle to the best of her power, and partly from pride, and partly from a nervous dread of diving into unpleasant mysteries, had closed her eyes and seen nothing. Now, to her son's dismay and amazement, she burst into tears.

"It is a shame, a cruel shame, for you and Ethel to make my old age miserable in this way," she cried: "it is indeed! I wonder you have not more pity on your old mother, Arthur."

"What can I do? What have I done?" he asked; but he comforted her after a fashion of his own, and presently the tears ceased.

Then it came out—of course it was a secret, a profound secret. Ethel had made her swear not to reveal it; had told it to her only on the most solemn promise not to betray her. Only an hour ago, she had confided to her, that, so soon as she was of age (which event would now take place in a few days), it was her intention also to go abroad, and to pay her friend Christine Barbier a visit at Nice. "You and Mr. O'Neil will be very glad to get rid of me for a little," the girl had said with a tremulous little laugh. "I know you will. I am only in the way here. Remember, Mrs. O'Neil, that you were very happy together before I came to you, bringing worry and annoyance and unhappiness to you; and you will be happy again when I'm gone."

"And it is true, Arthur: God knows

what the child says is quite true," the old lady said, repeating Ethel's words to her son. "She has brought nothing but worry and annoyance to both of us; and yet I'll be lonely after her when she has left me. And now you want to leave me too,—both of you!" she concluded with a strangled little sob.

Then suddenly, "Am I mad?" she inquired. "Maybe you are playing some sort of a farce," she cried, "and you are both going together."

Mr. O'Neil actually laughed—what he had not done for some time—at the notion.

"Hardly," he replied. Then, after a moment or two of thought, "I had no idea of Miss Mildmay's plans," he remarked. "Of course, I will not leave you under those circumstances. I took it for granted that she meant to remain with us till her uncle's return."

"You may always take the contrary to what you suppose for granted where that child is concerned," said the old lady crossly. "Yes, child, I am speaking of you," as Ethel at the moment entered the room; "and I have broken my promise too. I could not help it. I have just told Arthur what you told me; and indeed I must say, that, considering he is your guardian, he has the right to know."

Ethel grew red, then pale. "Of course he has the right to know. I meant to tell him," she said in a low voice. "But I only received Christine's answer, saying that she would be glad to have me, to-day."

"I am sorry you are going to leave my mother, Miss Mildmay; but it will be for a little while, will it not? You will come back to her?"

"I don't know. I"—she looked hesitatingly at the old lady, and her eyes filled up with tears. "Mrs. O'Neil, I will come back to you whenever you want me. I will indeed!" she cried; and she threw herself upon the old lady's neck, and kissed her passionately.

Mrs. O'Neil was astounded at this sudden outburst. For days she and Ethel had been on distant terms, and had treated one another with cool civility. Needless to say that she was completely mollified by it too.

"Children, children!" she groaned. "Why can't we be all happy together as we were before?" she inquired pathetically. "What has come over us all?"

Nobody answered her question. Who could? And, when the painful silence which followed it was at last broken, it was by Mr. O'Neil discussing with Ethel her intended journey. But he spoke no more of his own.

Every thing comes to an end sooner or later. Those wretched, painful days came to an end at last. Miss Mildmay's approaching departure from Mount Druid was common intelligence now. "For a few weeks only," it was given out that she was to be away. Nobody knew, or, at all events, nobody pretended to know, not even her guardian (though he well knew it), that she was paying Mount Druid a long farewell, and that, on the day his guardianship would expire, they meant to become strangers to one another. Ethel had told Mrs. O'Neil, that, whenever she wanted her to come back to her, come back she would. But she had told him nothing of the sort, nor had he asked her to return. She was free now to do as she pleased, and he, too, was free. The bonds which had bound them to one another were dissolved: they were unnatural, galling bonds; and both were glad to be relieved of them. Guardian and ward!—that hated relationship had ceased at last, and henceforward they were to be nothing to one another. Until her uncle's return from India, there did, of course, still exist a nominal guardianship; but it was a mere name, and simply meant that Mr. O'Neil would still hold himself accountable for her welfare and safety. But he had no power to control her movements, no power over her person or property. On the day she was twenty-one, by her father's will, Ethel Mildmay was her own mistress.

Poor, foolish Col. Mildmay! How well he had loved her! How fondly and blindly he had trusted her even to the last! It was Ethel's fate to be loved and petted and trusted. The worse she behaved, the more resolved were those who were fond of her to confound her by their confidence and generosity. Those to whom it was her cruel destiny to bring grief and disappointment were the very ones who trusted her best still. Miss Mildmay, as we see, seems pretty well to know how to make use of her new-born liberty, and to try how far her now full-grown wings will carry her. Here she is making ready to start across Europe, bidding her late hosts a polite farewell, and wandering forth from the kindly, safe shelter of their happy home into the wide world amongst strangers. But she has something to do before she leaves them: there is yet another arrow for her bow. And Miss Mildmay is rubbing up her courage, and trying to find a brave heart and a steady hand with which to discharge it.

And so that sad Christmas week dragg'd

itself to an end, and it was the last day of the old year, — the day upon which Lord O'Neil's family-party was to take place. As his cousin, Mrs. O'Neil declared, the world was topsy-turvy; and she, for her part, did not know whether she was standing on her head or her heels. This assertion was made as she stood at the hall-door watching her son and his ward drive off to Castle Garvagh for the purpose of accepting its master's hospitable invitation. Since the day upon which it had arrived at Mount Druid, little more discussion had taken place concerning it. Mr. O'Neil had said that day that he meant to accept it; and he had not altered his mind since. Ethel, on the contrary, had announced her determination to decline it; but she had, as we see, exercised the privilege of her sex. The old lady herself, however, had been positive in her determination not to be of the party. She was too old, she said, for "gadding about," and was afraid of exposing herself to cold. These were, at least, the excuses which she made to Lord O'Neil for her absence; though, as she told her son, her fingers itched to write him the truth. But Mr. O'Neil coaxed and argued her into employing the common forms of civility, being firmly determined that neither he himself, nor any one belonging to him, should give the old lord the satisfaction of supposing they resented the favor with which he chose to treat his rival. Ethel, as she sat silently by her guardian's side in the high mail phaeton which he was driving, and from time to time cast furtive glances at his grave, stern profile, marvelled to herself what was the secret of his strange determination to dine at Castle Garvagh that day, and felt a strong impulse to ask him to account for it. But she was afraid, — actually afraid, — Ethel Mildmay was afraid! All her native audacity had melted into thin air, and she was silent and subdued. Her companion's set, impassible face frightened her, and her own heavy heart deprived her of even a wish to overcome her fear. But, if she was frightened, she was also curious, desperately curious, — curious to know what he was thinking of; what he thought of her; whether he really hated her as she deserved to be hated; whether the loss of the letters was the irreparable loss he had at first supposed it to be, or whether the hope of his life was still alive, and he believed that he yet might one day be master of Castle Garvagh. Since the day of the fatal discovery, they had never had a word of private conversation: her guardian had even, she

knew very well, sedulously avoided her society.

And now was this hour and a half's *tête-à-tête* to pass in total silence? Of course not. She, a woman, could not stand such a thing. If he would not satisfy her curiosity, she at least would satisfy his. She would break this hard mass of ice beside her, and send it shivering into a thousand pieces. If her guardian really detested her, he should at least detest her actively and openly, and not kill her with this overpowering coldness and reserve. And so, after about half an hour's tremulous consideration, she began. "Mr. O'Neil," she said in rather a low, shaky voice, "I want to explain something to you."

He had evidently been thinking deeply; for he started and turned round quickly. "Do you, Miss Mildmay?"

"Yes. I want to tell you what is bringing me to Castle Garvagh to-day. I think I had better; for, after all, you *are* my guardian still."

He laughed slightly. "I release you from any obligation," he replied. "It is only forestalling your rights by a few hours. To-morrow"—

"Yes, of course, I know that I am free to-morrow; but that does not make me so to-day. I choose to tell you, Mr. O'Neil."

"As you like. Well?" Very coolly said, — so coolly indeed, that she crimsoned angrily, and made a sudden fit of courage.

"I want to see Count O'Neil — you know whom I mean," with a shade of hesitation, "most particularly; and so I — I — In fact, I have made an appointment with him."

Her guardian actually turned round in his seat. If Ethel wanted to astonish him, she had succeeded in doing so. "I do know whom you mean, and I marvel at you," he began indignantly; then he checked himself. "What a fool I am!" he said impatiently.

"I think so," Miss Mildmay said demurely.

Mr. O'Neil bit his lips, and again contemplated his horses' heads. "It was needless trouble to make an appointment," he observed very coldly after a little pause. "The young man is staying at the castle: of course you will meet him there."

"Yes. But we have settled to meet at the old abbey beforehand. In the castle we might be disturbed; and I have something very particular to say to him. He is to be there at four, and — Oh, dear me!" looking at her watch, "it is after three already. Please drive a little fast, Mr. O'Neil."

Her guardian made no reply; but he administered a sharper admonition to his horses than they were accustomed to. Ethel's command was obeyed: they drove at full speed to Castle Garvagh.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AND soon they reached it. Not another word had been spoken between them; and Ethel was the first to speak now. "Please let me down here, Mr. O'Neil," she said, as they reached a path which led by a short cut from the avenue to the abbey: "this is my way."

The phaeton was stopped, and the girl jumped lightly out. The roads were so bad, and the nights so dark, that it had been arranged that they were to sleep, as well as dine, at the castle, and drive home to the New-Year's breakfast at Mount Druid in the morning. Hannah, who was in the back-seat with the groom, noticed that her young lady's face was singularly pale, and wore a peculiar expression when she reached the ground, and stood for a moment in the road. She had, it appeared, still a word to say to her guardian; for, just as he was driving off, she detained him. What that word was, much as she would have liked to hear it, the maid did not hear; for Mr. O'Neil bent down to catch it, and it was said in a low voice.

"Mr. O'Neil, will you come to fetch me at the abbey in half an hour? I should be so much obliged to you!" the young lady requested.

He had given up being astonished, but for the life of him he could not help being angry. "I am afraid it is impossible, Miss Mildmay. I have my uncle to see, and several things to do."

"Do come, Mr. O'Neil: I want you."

"Hardly, I think;" and he laughed. "Pray what do you want me for?"

"I want you to — to formally release me from your guardianship. Do your duty, Mr. O'Neil; you had no right to become my guardian unless you meant faithfully to perform your duty to the last;" and her eyes sparkled, and her foot stamped the earth petulantly. "You promised papa, — poor papa, you know," — she said suddenly and with a gasp.

He grew rather pale. "That is true; but"—

"I will expect you," Miss Mildmay said, turning away abruptly, and with her queen-

liest step marching down the side-path which led to the abbey.

It was a dull, sombre day. The snow and brightness had melted away; and the old year was calmly dying, enveloped in a vast, gray, leaden shroud. It was horribly sad and still and dreary, and the old abbey, when Ethel reached it, which she did in a few minutes, looked the picture of solitude and desolation.

But it was a pretty place, for all that; though Ethel was not thinking much about, or even, perhaps, seeing, its beauty just then. In the far horizon the sun, now near his setting, was struggling to escape from his cloud-imprisonment; and the sea was quivering beneath, — a dim, yellow, mysterious expanse. But the abbey was still in solemn, gloomy shade, its ivy-covered, ruined walls, picturesquely crowning the gentle eminence upon which they stood, and keeping, as it were, silent, watchful guard over the old churchyard, in which the hopes and fears, and once beating hearts of centuries, lay now, peacefully hushed to rest forever.

But Ethel's heart was beating still. What was it to her that all these around her were dead, when she was alive? The girl was a little before her time, nobody was there yet; and she sat down to wait upon the grass-grown graves, and looked about her with eyes suddenly grown strangely lustreless and blank and hopeless. What were all these lived lives, these mysterious, untold secrets of the past, to her? She was alive and she wanted happiness: she wanted the blue sky, and the bright, smiling earth, and love and joy and happiness. This universal grayness, above, around her, was too much for her, — was breaking her heart, she thought, at last. Hot tears started to her eyes, and slowly trickled down her cheeks, and fell upon the few pale, shivering little Christmas flowers which were growing amongst the graves.

But they did not flow for long: soon the sound of a quick, familiar step made her dry them hastily, and extinguish them with smiles. It was the count, dressed as if for an afternoon stroll upon the Boulevarts, breathless, radiant, excited. "I have made you wait. Will you ever pardon me? But need I tell you that it was not my fault?" he exclaimed eagerly. "That ancient *coquin* is jealous of every hour that I am out of his sight. My position is rapidly becoming intolerable, — simply intolerable; and I have resolved, right or wrong, to bolt. Just think of my being totally unable for this last fortnight to go over to see you, mademoiselle, — I, whose sole

object in coming to this confounded, un-blessed country was to be near you!"

Evidently, feather-head that he was, their last tragic meeting and parting had made no impression on him; or perhaps the effect of Ethel's having, of her own accord, sought this interview, had obliterated all resentment and alarm from his mind.

"You are resolved to leave Lord O'Neil then, are you?" she inquired, calmly ignoring this last pointed speech.

"Certainly. My mother may preach patience and resignation as much as she pleases; but another ten days of this work would be the death of me. He is completely mad,—completely, poor old wretch; and insane people," and he heaved a sigh, "live forever. It is miraculous,—positively miraculous. The old lunatic has a constitution of iron. It will never wear out."

"But how will you escape?" Ethel asked, hardly able to suppress a laugh. "Lord O'Neil will not let you go."

Mon Dieu! I will quite simply evade myself, without a word to anybody,—not even my mother. She would wish me to gratify this mad, affectionate whim of his forever, and stay on. But it is impossible. I would end by going mad and suiding myself; or perhaps," and he shuddered slightly, "my uncle would kill me. He looks at me sometimes with a furtive, wild glare that chills my blood. And then the castle is *triste*, oh, so desolatingly *triste*! In a word, life is insupportable under the circumstances."

"But how is it that you have borne it so long, count?" Miss Mildmay inquired a little satirically.

He had sat down by her side. Now, suddenly, before she knew what had happened, he had seized her hand, and covered it with kisses. "Mademoiselle, you ask me!—you make me such a question! You are cruel."

She let her hand lie in his. "I don't mean to be cruel," she said in a low voice.

"Ethel, dear Ethel, you know what has made me bear it; you know what has brought me and kept me here; you know that I swore, that, on the day you were free to marry me, I would ask you to be my wife."

"And that day is to-morrow," Miss Mildmay said after a little pause, quietly. "Well, count?"

He looked at her pale face and cloudy eyes, puzzled. What did they mean? What did her calm, strange behavior mean?

He flushed up. "Mademoiselle, the last

time I saw you," he said, talking very fast, "you said some strange things to me; but I have forgotten them: now I remember nothing but that I love you. Mademoiselle, I humbly offer you my hand: will you accept it?"

"She looked at him with a half-smile. "But do you like me, count?" she inquired.

"Mademoiselle!"

"Because if you do, if you really like me, I will"—there was a pause, a long pause—"I will marry you!"

"Ethel!"

"Wait a minute," she said, — "wait. Count, I am a vain, foolish girl, as you know: why on earth you ever took the trouble of liking me is a puzzle which perplexes me, and will perplex me to the end of the chapter. But since you *do* like me," and one of the sweet, old deprecating smiles flitted momentarily across her lips, "I will, as I say, marry you, on condition that you will give me a proof of your love. In the old days, you know, knights used to win the smiles of their lady-loves by fighting for them; and now —"

"And now," he interrupted impetuously, "in these new days, there are true and brave knights still. Mademoiselle, I will fight for you to the death."

"Ah! but," Ethel said, shaking her head, and laughing a little sadly, "it is not a case of fighting: it is a case of — will you listen to me, count?"

She was very calm and composed, but as white as the soft white feather in her hat, which was the only bit of color she wore. Her companion was, in spite of himself, subdued by her grave, quiet ways, so strangely different from her usual petulance and vivacity. They made him uneasy, vaguely alarmed: he could not make them out. Now, in answer to her question, he merely bowed his head.

"Listen to me patiently I mean," she went on, "without growing angry, or interrupting me. I am afraid, though, I shall make you angry."

"You could not!" he said promptly.

She smiled. "A rash promise, count," she said, — "a rash promise; but it can't be helped. And now listen to me: what I must say I will say in a very few words. When, nearly two years ago, I first knew you, and consented to become your wife, I believed you to be what you told me you were, — Madame O'Neil's son, and Lord O'Neil's heir. Now I *know* that you are not this."

The young man jumped to his feet, his eyes flashing like two live coals. "Mademoiselle, do you mean to insult me?"

"Ah!" she said, "your promise, broken already! Let me finish, count, it will not take long; and, if you will but have patience, you will see that I do not. This is nothing new to you: the last time we met I told you the same thing. I know that you are not an O'Neil; I know that you are not Madame O'Neil's son; I know that your name is Irwin, and that you are her sister's son, because I have held the proofs that it is so in my own hands, and read them with my own eyes. I know that, as sure as my name is Ethel Mildmay, yours is not O'Neil; and yet here I am ready to become your wife, and to swear that I will be a good and faithful wife to you, on one condition,—that you will renounce your false claims, and acknowledge yourself to be what you are."

She expected an explosion; but none came. The fiery young man seemed suddenly to have been turned into stone. "Pray continue," was all he said, as she paused.

Her voice fell, and trembled a little. "On this condition I will marry you," she went on. "I am rich,—at least, rich enough to marry a poor man: I will do my best to make you happy, and perhaps I may succeed. At least, you will be happy in the consciousness of having acted well and nobly; and I" she suddenly gave him her hand,—"I will be proud of you, and even papa will forgive and bless me."

But he flung it from him. "What farce is this we are playing?" he said indignantly. "Mademoiselle, we are not on the stage; nor is there an admiring audience around to admire and applaud these noble but impossible sentiments."

She colored. "It is no farce," she exclaimed warmly, "but the sad, sober truth: all your life you have been deceived; but you must be forced to see the truth at last. Madame O'Neil is a bad, scheming woman. Happier, far happier, are you in your own real mother, who does, I know, love you with all her heart, than in this false, ambitious, heartless, pretended mother of yours. Listen to me; you must let me finish: she is false and wicked, and not worthy to be your mother. All your life you have been her dupe: your mother, Mrs. Irwin, has been her suffering tool. Surely it is better for you to know the truth, painful, dreadful as it is, but still the truth, to know it even now, than to go on acting this miserable, lying part you have unconsciously acted all your life."

In her eagerness the girl had laid her hand upon his arm. The young man was chafing and champing like some wild animal,

"A thousand times over it is a lie—a lie!" he cried. "You talk of proofs, show them to me: if your eyes have seen them, may not mine see them too?"

"You have not seen them, then?"

"You make the question seriously?"

"What am I thinking of? Of course she would not show them to you. You ought to thank God on your knees that that woman is not your mother. Count, she has stolen them,—yes, stolen them, like a thief, from my guardian's house."

He stared at her as though he believed her mad. Poor Ethel felt just then as though she were mad, as though they were all mad, and the whole world a vast lunatic asylum.

"Why are you a woman, and not a man?" he broke out impetuously. "Why am I tied hand and foot, and forced to listen to such insults as these?"

She drew back and laughed. "Five minutes ago," she said, "you swore to me that you would lay down your life for me, and now you would like to send a bullet through my head,—ah, Ernest!"

It was the first time he had ever heard his name pass her lips, and he suddenly grew pale, tears started to his eyes. "You are bent on driving me distracted," he exclaimed angrily. "It is true, I would willingly hate you, and yet"—

"You will marry me, and give up Castle Garvagh. Surely of the two, I am the most worthy of your choice;" and she drew near to him again and smiled.

"Give up Castle Garvagh! Give it up to whom?"

"To the rightful heir,—Arthur O'Neil, my guardian."

The name was like setting a match to gunpowder: he grew red as fire. "Never!" he exclaimed,—"never! I swear it."

"Very well," she said coldly; "that is my condition. You will not accept it; then we part. And this is what you call love!" she added with a light, stinging laugh.

"Or rather it is what you call love," the young man retorted. "I have heard of the capabilities of a woman's self-sacrifice, henceforward I will believe in it, mademoiselle;" and he made her a low bow. "I admire; but I confess candidly that I do not feel in me the strength to imitate."

Ethel looked at him, only vaguely guessing at his meaning. "Then to marry me would be to you a self-sacrifice?" she inquired warmly.

"For you to marry me would be one. Mademoiselle, let us at least be frank enemies, if we cannot be frank friends: you

have wearied of me; I have ceased to please you."

Ethel colored. "I have told you that I am willing to marry you: what more do you want?"

The young man was silent. Suddenly he looked up with a laugh. "I declare, here comes one, wonderfully à propos, who will, perhaps, help us to elucidate this terrible *imbroglio* we have got into, and answer your question," he said. "Mademoiselle, will you kindly present me to my uncle?"

Ethel turned round aghast. The half-hour had sped far too rapidly away. Yet dismayed as she was, and gladly as she would have dispensed her guardian from so punctually obeying her behests, she was not quite insensible to a little thrill of triumph at his submission.

It was, indeed, Mr. O'Neil; and he and the count were face to face again, as they had been on that memorable day in the gay gardens of Monaco, with Ethel Mildmay between them.

The girl had rashly brought about the situation; but she was incapable of uttering a word or making a sign. It was Mr. O'Neil who broke the silence first.

"We must dispense with the ceremony of introduction, I see, sir," he said with a cold politeness, and then he turned to Ethel. "Miss Mildmay requested me, for some reason only known to herself, to meet you here; and so here I am."

The count bowed. "I am as much in the dark as you are yourself, sir," he replied with a dry laugh: "doubtless, mademoiselle your ward will kindly explain."

He seemed transformed, — another man. Wounded vanity had suddenly given him strength and dignity to play his difficult part, and had abruptly given him the key to the perplexed position.

Ethel stared at him amazed.

"I have nothing to explain, — nothing!" she broke out with a little strangled sob. "I have only made another mistake, that is all, in believing that you ever cared a pin for me."

It was not a very dignified ebullition; but Ethel could be dignified up to a certain point, though not beyond it. Melancholy to relate, now she was on the verge of tears.

But this reproach was too much for the poor count's endurance.

"Not care for you!" he repeated: "is that fair, is that just, mademoiselle? — and when you, too, have just been at such excessive pains to prove to me that I am totally indifferent to you!"

"I have not told you so."

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but yet

so clearly that none but an idiot could any longer misunderstand your meaning."

They were like a pair of children quarrelling. Rather impatiently Mr. O'Neil looked from one to the other. "Come, what is it all about?" he inquired a little satirically.

"I have no objection to tell you: on the contrary, I desire that you should be umpire between us, sir. What say you, mademoiselle?" And he gave Ethel a peculiar smile.

She reddened. "This is folly — Mr. O'Neil knows nothing about it — it is strictly between ourselves," she said, nervously tearing a little bunch of pale flowers, which she had found amongst the graves, to pieces.

"But I must defend myself, must I not?" the count went on, gradually losing his self-control, and waxing warm. "Sir, mademoiselle has just accused me of not caring for her; listen to the facts. I do care for her, God knows how well," and his voice faltered, "but not sufficiently, I confess it, for the sake of winning her, to renounce my mother, to proclaim myself and her impostors, and without a struggle to resign into your hands the property to which, doubtless in good faith, we both consider ourselves heirs. I love her, but she does not love me; and yet she is willing, actually willing, to become my wife on such mad conditions as these. As I have told her, sir, it is an amount of self-sacrifice which it is simply impossible that I should accept. There, do you understand now?"

Mr. O'Neil shook his head. "Not in the least," he said coldly.

The count looked from one to the other. Perhaps the truth flashed across him, and that a really generous impulse prompted him to speak; perhaps he spoke because silence cost him too much.

"Then I will enlighten you," he said vehemently, — "enlighten you at my own expense. We have been rivals on more subjects than one: on one, victory still hangs in the balance, but, to speak honestly, it appears to incline more to my side than yours. On the other" — he paused, then he laughed, and offered Mr. O'Neil his hand — "I acknowledge myself beaten: it is a game at which one must lose. I have lost; but still I can be generous enough to congratulate you on your success."

"How silly!" Mr. O'Neil said the words with an impatient, disgusted sigh. "In Heaven's name, have we not had enough of all this?" he asked.

But the count could not restrain his mortification and irritation a moment

longer. "Silly! — perhaps so," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "but true for all that: ask mademoiselle herself to deny it if she can."

Mr. O'Neil had been glaring at the young man angrily; now, suddenly, he looked at Ethel, who was standing, white as snow, a few steps apart.

"Don't mind him!" she said with a faint smile: "he is angry with me,—angry with me because I know the truth, and wanted, at any price, to save you."

There was a long pause.

"How silly!" Mr. O'Neil again repeated, sharply and coldly.

The count looked first at one, then at the other; finally at his watch. "Excuse me," he said: it is late, and I dare not remain longer absent from my great-uncle. *Au revoir, sir; au revoir, mademoiselle.* We shall presently meet again at the castle." And he walked away, bravely humming an opera air.

"How silly, how excessively silly!" Mr. O'Neil exclaimed sharply for the third time. "What do you mean, Miss Mildmay, by asking me to be witness to such a foolish scene as this?"

This was the reward of her self-devotion. Ethel turned from him, for he had taken a few hasty steps toward her, with a little shivering sob.

"It was silly of me," she said humbly; "but I fancied that he really cared for me enough to give up Castle Garvagh for my sake."

And she said it so meekly, and looked so crushed and sad, that, somehow or other, his heart was pierced through and through.

"Why did you let him suppose that you did not like him?" he asked with quick kindness: "of course that made him angry. Come, don't cry. The mistake is soon remedied. I will call him back."

Ethel caught his arm. "But I do not care for him, Mr. O'Neil!" she exclaimed eagerly.

"And yet you said you would marry him."

"Oh, how stupid you are!" she cried with sudden petulance — "how stupid and dull you are! Don't you see that I wanted him to take me, and leave you Castle Garvagh? It was the only thing I could do, Mr. O'Neil; the only thing I knew how to do; the one single way I could think of to reward you for all your goodness to me, and to make up for all the evil I have done you."

There was a deep flush upon her cheek, and there were great bright tears in her eyes. There was something else in them

too; something strong and sweet and deep, that made him stagger like a drunken man, and grow suddenly as pale as death.

"You do not care for him?" he repeated slowly. "Is that true?"

"It is. O Mr. O'Neil! it is true indeed."

"It is not too late. Shall I call him back?" he said in a low, strange voice.

A tremulous, tearful smile was on her lips.

"If you like, Mr. O'Neil," she replied with a faint, faint flash of her own demure sauciness.

"If I like!"

The last day of the old year was dying out in a grand crimson glow. The sun had gone to sleep in the pale, misty, solemn sea, and was kissing with its red farewell kisses the gray old abbey and the grass-grown tombs. Long shadows were lying about. But these two walked from the shadows out into brightness, and understood one another at last.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

THERE must always be a fool in the middle. Happiness is unfortunately generally bought at somebody's expense.

But the count bore up bravely. Vanity occasionally serves one instead of pride; and, though he was not a proud man,* he was, as we well know, a vain one, and so was in no wise disposed to wear a poor mouth over his defeat.

On the contrary, when they all met at dinner that day, he congratulated Ethel with the best possible grace. "Only, mademoiselle, it was not fair or kind of you, considering our — our old intimacy, not to have let me into your confidence before," he said with gay reproach.

Miss Mildmay, to do her justice, looked a little shamefaced. "How in the world it has all come about," she said, shaking her pretty head thoughtfully, "is more than I can understand. One fact I am very clear of, count, is, that you did me the honor of refusing to marry me to-day. Talk of French gallantry after that!"

Smiling, happy villages live in the path of the lava-stream which will one day destroy them. Men and women have danced, and will to the end of the chapter dance, on volcanoes. Young people will be young and gay under any circumstances. This was supposed to be a sort of festival, a cheerful family-gathering; and they all felt

that it was manners, if nothing else, to forget and lay aside for the nonce all personal sentiments, and for once in their lives, at all events, to be friends all round.

Somehow or other it did not seem to be a very difficult undertaking. Perhaps it was Lord O'Neil's rare, delicious old wine, unearthed for the occasion from the most remote and carefully-guarded cellar, which helped to promote charity and good-will amongst the men. Or perhaps it was, that some mysterious attraction, stronger even than the rivalry, which, in spite of themselves, made enemies of them, existed between them. At all events, Ethel during dinner that day came to the conclusion that she would never, so long as she lived, be surprised at any thing again.

What a strange meal it was! What a queer little family-party they four made of it! Needless to record that she, the only lady, was treated with all due honor, and that the old lord paid her the most marked attention. He was in great good-humor that evening. Afterwards it was remembered, and made a note of, that for months and months, even years, Lord O'Neil had never been less grim, less peculiar, less of a lunatic, than on this particular night. Now and then, indeed, his eye gleamed a little wildly; and a curious, furtive expression, which, whenever she perceived it, made Ethel shiver in the midst of her happiness, crossed his face. But on the whole he was calm and kindly, even faintly jovial, and did not by word or deed betray any symptom of insanity.

The dinner was worthy of a *cordon-bleu*. The wine, as we know, was delicious. It was the one occasion of the whole year that the old man threw off his miserly habits, and that lavish expense took the place of revolting stinginess. The table groaned beneath delicacies which came from beyond the sea. Choice fruit and flowers, handsome plate and glass, adorned it; and it stood tiny, sparkling, and gorgeous in the midst of the great banquet-hall of Castle Garvagh, which was lit up with the brilliancy of daylight.

There were, however, as may be imagined, a few eccentric incongruities in the midst of all this splendor. One of the attendants, old John, the Mount Druid coachman, was the master of ceremonies. His subordinate was Biddy, the blue-eyed, broad-shouldered girl whom Ethel had seen with a basket of turf upon her head the first memorable day she had passed the threshold of Castle Garvagh, and who now pitched about the rare old family china and handsome plate upon which all

the good things were served with a recklessness truly appalling. Hannah, hovering about the distant corners of the immense room, but too "mindful of her position," as she afterwards explained to her young mistress, to approach the table, or take part in the actual duty of serving, did her best to assist the feeble John, and to restrain the impetuous Biddy, who, in honor of the great occasion, had squeezed her great feet into an unaccustomed pair of boots which creaked violently. Needless to say that Miss Mildmay went off more than once into subdued fits of laughter over the countless amusing and quaint incidents of this strange repast, and that over and over again she mentally rubbed her eyes to make sure that she was really awake, and not dreaming some fantastic, extraordinary dream.

Taking advantage of one of the many crashes that occurred, and of the temporary direction of Lord O'Neil's terrible eyes to Biddy's proceedings, the count managed to inform the others of the cause of the uncouth native's presence.

"Denis Irwin is, you know, the one servant — male servant — in the castle," he explained; "and he waits upon us as well as every thing else; but my great uncle seems somehow or other to have taken him, too, *en grippe* latterly, and today he insisted upon his going home and spending the evening *en famille*. *Ma foi!* I made no objection, I assure you," pursued the young man with a comic shrug. "It is not particularly pleasant for a sensitive fellow like me to be served by his own uncle. Prejudices are foolish things, but they exist for all that; and it costs me something even to eat this excellent dinner, which, I tell you in confidence, has been cooked by my aunt," he concluded with a laugh.

"I fancied Irwin never left the old man," whispered Mr. O'Neil.

"Nor does he, except very rarely. Latterly, as I say, our respected uncle seems rather to dislike him; and they say Irwin's influence has passed to me. Certainly, once or twice lately, I have succeeded in soothing him when Irwin has failed."

"What means do you employ?" Mr O'Neil inquired.

"Oh, that depends! When he becomes very excited, I generally have recourse to the organ. Music hardly ever fails to calm him; and I believe that my being something of a musician accounts for his habitual docility to me. It was a clever idea, was it not, of my mother's, to insist upon my studying the organ last winter in Paris.

I wonder, sir, that nobody ever made you learn the organ," he added with a rueful laugh.

Mr. O'Neil laughed too: so did Ethel, as their eyes met, which they did pretty often now.

There was time for no more. Dinner was over. Biddy, with her creaking boots, Hannah, and John had all retired. A profound silence reigned through the vast, bright room.

With a cracked, quavering voice Lord O'Neil broke it. Raising with a shaky hand his glass, filled with dark, rich wine, to his lips, "I wish to propose a toast," the old man said. "Let us drink to the health and happiness of the heir of Castle Garvagh!" And the poor old creature cast a malicious glance round the table. There was a brief pause. Ethel's heart jumped into her mouth. Then why or how it happened, nobody ever knew; but Arthur O'Neil and the count looked at one another, touched their glasses across the table, and drank in silence.

Probably the wicked old lord was disappointed by this unexpected demonstration of amity between the rivals. At all events, he was amazed: so, indeed, were they all,—the performers no less than the spectators.

"Life is short; quarrels are odious, troublesome necessities," soliloquized the count when they had all adjourned after dinner to the drawing-room, and Lord O'Neil was busy doing the honors of his entertainment to Ethel. "I assure you, uncle, I am glad of this opportunity of telling you, that, for my part, I hate strife and contention, and would, if I could, willingly live in peace with all the world."

And, so saying, the young man threw himself luxuriously back in an easy-chair, and yawned despondingly.

Mr. O'Neil could not repress a smile. "I am quite of your way of thinking, count," he said; "but unfortunately"—

"Ah, yes, there it is! Unfortunately we are forced to quarrel, and there is no help for it. *Mon Dieu!* If even the game were worth the candle!" And he sighed and laughed.

"And you don't think it is!"

"I suppose it is. My mother tells me that it is. But"—and he shrugged his shoulders—"I am not ambitious myself; and I confess to you that this vast, gloomy house, and this dreary, wretched country possess no attractions for me. What will you? One can't alter one's inclinations, and I give you my word of honor," he exclaimed with sudden frankness, "I believe I sometimes wish the whole business—

Castle Garvagh, wealth, prospects, contentions, O'Neils, all and every one of them, myself included—at the bottom of the sea."

Mr. O'Neil laughed; but he gave him a curious glance. "Most people would think these prospects of which you speak so slightly rather pleasant ones than otherwise," he said quietly.

"I suppose so. But I agree with Solomon,—all is vanity. By the way, what is your opinion of these same prospects?" he demanded suddenly.

Mr. O'Neil was a little taken aback by this frank inquiry. "My opinion?" he repeated.

"Which has the best chance,—you or I?"

Very calmly, and with a steady glance, Mr. O'Neil replied, "You have, I think—now."

The young man jumped up. "I am sorry for you, then: you care about it much more than I do. The quarrel has been not of my seeking, but has been forced upon me. However, I'll fight it out for my mother's sake,—and a little for my own too," he added with a laugh. "After all, I suppose there are some advantages in being rich and the 'head of the family.'"

Mr. O'Neil winced a little. "A few," he said dryly.

There was a short pause. Mr. O'Neil was looking across the room at Ethel's fair head, which was bent over a book of old prints which Lord O'Neil was showing her. The count's eyes were thoughtfully fixed upon the fire: suddenly he raised them and extended his hand. "To-night, the last of the old year, we are friends; but we shall have to begin the new year by hating one another again," he said abruptly. "There will probably never be another opportunity; so let me profit of this one to tell you that I am the victim to circumstances, and that I bear you no ill will, not even, uncle, for the *mauvais tour* you played me to-day." Perhaps there was something slightly theatrical in the speech and act; but, if there was, Mr. O'Neil did not see it. He took the young man's hand and shook it warmly.

"It is true," he said, "we must be enemies indeed; but at heart we may be friends. You have more to forgive me, count, than I you."

"And victory can afford to be generous; eh, sir?" And the count laughed.

At the moment Ethel raised her head, and glanced a little anxiously towards the two men; but, when she saw that they were laughing, the cloud cleared away from her forehead, and she smiled.

"Yes," Mr. O'Neil said, "I will fight for

Castle Garvagh still,—fight probably to lose. But I am content to lose, now that I have got her."

"I believe you. So would I, if she had only had the good taste to prefer me."

"She could not care for us both, you know."

"*C'est vrai;*" and the count whistled and laughed.

But he turned away abruptly, and Mr. O'Neil did not see his gay, handsome face again for a minute or two.

Ethel lay in bed a long time that night before she fell asleep,—the first time she had ever slept in Castle Garvagh; the last, as she very well knew, that she would ever sleep there again. It was the same room to which she had been carried on the day of Tinker's disaster and her own accident; and now she lay, vainly trying to sleep, in the very same bed with its nodding, hearse-like plumes, upon which she had, on that day, first opened her eyes after her fainting-fit, and seen Mrs. Irwin's pale face leaning over her.

Ethel liked neither the room nor the bed, and was longing to be back in her own bright, cheerful little apartment at Mount Drnid. Truth to tell, those sad, dark plumes over her head were frightening her. Terrors of ghosts and apparitions were filling her excited brain; and not even the bright flame of a blazing fire, nor the close proximity of Hannah, as evinced by that personage's peaceful snores, were sufficient to make her feel happy and at ease. Mr. O'Neil had insisted that Hannah should sleep with her. Ethel, brave enough in anticipation, had laughed at his anxious care, and had declared that she did not know what it was to be frightened at night. But he had laughingly reminded her that Castle Garvagh was haunted, and that ghosts were particularly lively on the last night of the old year, and had, in fine, ordered Hannah not to leave her young lady's room.

"I have a right still to do so," he reminded her with a smile. "Remember, you are my ward still."

"Till to-morrow," Miss Mildmay replied with a toss of her head,—"till to-morrow, Mr. O'Neil."

He laughed at her sauciness. "Till to-morrow," he repeated; "and then"—

Ethel looked down, then up. "Mr. O'Neil," she said, "only for me, Castle Garvagh would be yours."

"Would it?" he replied; "but, Ethel,

you have made me forget that I ever cared for Castle Garvagh now."

The pleasant sound of these pleasant words was ringing in her ears now, mingling with the weird music of the other sounds which filled the night. Sad, strange sounds they were. The wind was sighing plaintively through the trees, reminding her with its low, pitiful wail of the *keen* of the Banshee, which a wide-spread and firmly believed-in superstition asserted was often heard in the neighborhood of the castle. The waves were plashing upon the beach with a dull, monotonous chant. Now and then the wild screech of some passing night-bird, or the growl of a dog, or one of the inexplicable noises by which the spirits of the dark hours are wont to remind us of their presence,—the creaking of some old piece of furniture, the shuddering sighs, the faint whispers, the rustling of garments, in fine, the countless sighs of that strange, unknown, mysterious language which was spoken at Castle Garvagh that night,—kept Ethel for hours wide awake with listening, sharp-edged ears, and a beating, tremulous heart. How grateful she was to her guardian for his persistency about Hannah now! How re-assuring and pleasant did the girl's sonorous, mortal snores sound in the midst of this weird, uncanny concert! What a comfort it was to know that she had a flesh-and-blood companion close at hand, and that she was not alone in the midst of the strange, bodiless company with which her excited nerves had peopled the air!

At last she slept too, and dreamed; or was it dreaming or waking that made her fancy, that, through the depths of the night, other sounds rose, gently at first, sweet and low, but swelling presently into a grand burst of harmony in which every other lesser sound was lost? The girl lay, listening to this wonderful, beautiful music in a sort of trance, marvelling whether it was real music, vaguely asking herself whether she was awake or asleep. Either the organ was being played, or she was dreaming that she heard it. Now it was faint and tremulous and sweet and low; and now it grew and swelled till it seemed to fill every corner of the great house, echoing through its vast corridors with a grand rush of sound which swept through them like a strong wind.

Dreaming or waking, Ethel listened spell-bound,—first amazed and frightened, then strangely soothed and charmed. Then suddenly there was a deep, intense quiet, in which the fall of a pin would have

made itself heard, and Ethel had turned upon her pillow with a deep, peaceful sigh, and was really asleep at last.

How long did she sleep? It seemed to her to have been a long time. Now she was wide awake, sitting up in her bed. Something had awakened her. What was it? Hannah was snoring still. The bright fire had all but expired, and a feeble flicker was the only light in the room. It was bitterly cold, she had time to feel that,—cold with a cold that seemed to freeze her blood, and to make her teeth chatter. Oh, what had wakened her! What was that shuddering rush of sound which was coming to her? What was that terrible red glare which suddenly illuminated the surrounding darkness? What was that voice, which, like the sweetest music that ever was, all at once made her feel strangely brave and composed and collected.

"Ethel," the voice said from the door, "come to me. You have only one minute. Awaken Hannah, and come to me here."

The words were said so quietly that they hardly frightened her. How it was done she did not know; but in a minute she and her maid, clothed somehow, were at the door.

"That is right," Mr. O'Neil said approvingly. "Now, dearest, close your eyes, don't be frightened, and trust yourself to me; and you, Hannah, stick close to us. Hold your tongue!" as the terrified maid set up a wild scream. "The house is on fire; but, if you only do as I tell you, you are perfectly safe."

The house on fire! Ethel did as she was told, and closed her eyes; that is to say, she closed them for an instant or two, while Mr. O'Neil took her in his arms as though she were an infant, and carried her swiftly down the broad corridor which led to the great staircase. Then she opened them. He had paused, perhaps to take breath; perhaps because—O God! what was it that she saw? One wing of the staircase was in flames. The hall beneath was thick with a black, blinding smoke. It seemed as though one wing of the house, that in which her room was not situated, was already a mass of living fire; and when she cast a glance behind, down the long passage through which they had just come, she fancied that she saw a lurid glare kindling at the farther end of it.

Suddenly an awful thought crossed her mind. "Arthur," she cried, "Arthur, the count! Oh! let me down. He sleeps down there. He told me that his room was there,—a few doors lower down than mine,—at the far end of that passage."

Her guardian obeyed, and put her on her feet. He was not strong, and could perhaps not bear her weight longer. They stood for half a second on the top of the staircase, in the midst of that roar of clashing noise, in that intolerable glare and heat, looking at one another; Hannah clinging to them, screaming madly.

"Down there!" repeated Mr. O'Neil. "Ethel, he slept in the other wing of the house, near Lord O'Neil. His room was next to his, and unless he has already escaped, God help him! he is lost."

"No, no, no!" Ethel cried. "His room was next Lord O'Neil's; but he did not occupy it. He told me that he would not sleep near him for all the world; and last night, before I fell asleep, I am sure I heard his step going past my door."

"You imagined it. There is no time to lose. Come." And he caught her up in his arms again.

But she freed herself from him. "Arthur!" she cried. "Arthur!"

He looked at her pale as death. "What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Save him! Save him!"

He glanced over the banisters, which were already smoking, down into the hall.

"The staircase will not hold much longer. The one chance of escape is the hall-door. What do you want me to do?" he asked again. But he did not wait for a reply. "Take Hannah's hand," he went on. "Go down the stairs. Don't mind smoke, flames even. Go straight to the hall-door, open it, and"—

"Never," she cried,—"never! I will not leave you, Arthur. I will wait for you here."

"You must."

"I can't. O Arthur, I cannot! I am afraid."

Again he looked down into the hall. "The staircase will hold two minutes longer," he said. "Wait then for me here, while you count sixty moderately quickly, but swear, that, if I have not then returned, you will do as I have told you."

"Arthur!"

"Swear," he cried, "or I will not stir an inch."

And swear it she did, because, in truth, she could not help it.

"Begin," he said: "One, two, three."

And when tremblingly she repeated the words after him, —

"God bless you, then!" he said. "He is not there I think; but, to satisfy you, I will try." And he was gone.

It takes long to describe: it took a second to act. "Four, five, six, seven." Quick-

ly, though not hurriedly, she counted the numbers with her eyes closed, with her hands firmly clasping those of her maid, who, frantic with terror, was struggling to escape from her. But Ethel held her fast, knowing well what she was doing. The door of the castle once opened, the rush of air through the house would kindle the flames, and the whole staircase would be in a blaze. Oh those moments! How did she live through them? How did she stand there like a statue, with the frantic girl at her side screaming and tearing, with that scorching heat growing hotter and hotter, with that awful rush and roar of flames around her? How did she stand there with terror paralyzing her limbs, with her brain growing dizzy, with that intolerable thought at her heart—oh, it was that that was hardest to bear of all!—that she had madly sent her guardian into danger, perhaps to death?

Till then she had never known how well she loved him. "Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two!" Already she had all but reached the fatal number. "Sixty!" She opened her eyes. Flames were above, around, beneath, everywhere. But she was in the midst of them with Hannah alone. Mr. O'Neil had not come back.

Then Ethel felt that death itself were better than this thing she must now do. Escape without him! Escape, leaving him behind in this burning mass! Escape to life, having sent him to death! And yet her oath—how could she break it! She knew that she was safe. She knew that Mr. O'Neil had counted time with accurate precision, and that he had wrung this promise from her, knowing well that she would not venture to break it, and that its observance would insure her safety. And Hannah, too, who now was totally incapable of action or self-guidance of any sort—how could she sacrifice another life as well as her own? How could she commit a deliberate murder?

Oh, if he would but come! "Arthur," she cried, going a step or two back into the passage, of which the farther end was now a blaze of light. "Arthur, oh, come!"

But, though it was a scream that might have called the dead to life, it did not bring him to her.

And so she must do it,—she must go into that dark region below, filled with smoke black as pitch. She must pass through flames, even if she saw them, rather than delay. She must open the great door of the castle, and by that very act close up, most probably, the single means of escape behind her. Oh! how

could she do it? With her foot upon the first stair she began the descent, still tightly clasping her maid's hand. She could not do it. She turned back again, and—Heaven was merciful after all—at that very instant she saw Mr. O'Neil's tall, dark figure appear against the background of red light which closed the remote end of the passage.

Afterwards she told him that the great joy and thankfulness of that instant made her entirely oblivious of the terrors which surrounded her. In a second he was by her side.

"I was right. He is not there," he said. "I tried every room; and the flames are as yet only in the lumber-room at the extreme end."

"He must have escaped."

What happened after that she scarcely knew. She was conscious of being clasped in his arms, of a wild confusion, of terrible suffocation, of blinding smoke, of an intolerable heat. She was conscious of the danger of an awful death; and yet she did not fear. She knew that at last they had reached the door, and that she and Hannah stood clinging to one another, while Mr. O'Neil unbolted and unbarred. And then—oh the blessedness of the next moment! The exquisite joy of the cool, dark night and the stars, and the delicious draught of fresh pure air! It was worth having lived through that fearful agony, and to have learnt, even at such a price, what the sweetness of life is. They were safe. Flames and death were behind them; but the tranquil night was greeting them, and danger was no more.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FOR them at least. But there was no time then for selfish joy, no time for any thing but a brief prayer of passionate gratitude. Oh! what a strange, terrible, beautiful scene was before them!—dark figures running wildly to and fro in the brilliant glare of that splendid blaze of fire; shouts and screams of human voices rising high and piercing above the crash and hell-like din of falling timber, of breaking glass, and of raging flames. It was awful; but it was beautiful. One side of the house was already half consumed; the other, that from which they had just escaped, was not burning yet, except, strange to say, at the extreme end, whence

a black column of smoke was mounting. But, even as they looked towards it, a sudden jet of flame burst out, which the wind carried along with fearful rapidity. In another minute, that side too was in a blaze. But it was in front of the other part of the house that a crowd of dark objects was congregated. Mr. O'Neil implored of Ethel not to approach; but a horrible fascination attracted her, and she clung to him, and dragged herself after him. The whole upper story was burning madly: evidently the flames had first broken out in that particular portion of the building; it was that in which were situated the rooms which Lord O'Neil occupied. In another minute it was easy to see that the roof would fall in; as it was, part of it had already given way. Ethel to her dying-day never forgot the awful spectacle which she saw then. At one of the windows of the long range of the upper story, two men were struggling frantically in one another's embrace. Behind them was a red, lurid glare, which told but too plainly that the back portion of the room must be burning. They were Lord O'Neil and the count. The old man, his long white hair streaming wildly behind him, and with the strength of a maniac, was clasping the count in his arms; while he was evidently desperately attempting to free himself from the terrible embrace, and to get out on the window-sill. People were screaming wildly for ladders. One had already been placed against a portion of the wall to which the flames had not yet reached; but it was a short one, and did not go within several yards of the fatal window. Ethel shut her eyes; but she saw all the same,—saw that fearful, fearful sight. Lord O'Neil would not let him escape: he was bent upon the young man's destruction. With all his might he seemed to be dragging him back into the burning room, and even from that distance the terror-stricken spectators below could see the wild, maniacal expression of the old man's face, which could not let them doubt that reason had entirely deserted him, and that he was a raging madman. It was awful, unbearable. Frantic women were shrieking; men were loudly calling on God for help. Not one of those then present ever forgot that cruel moment,—that grim, frantic struggle. Suddenly a deep, solemn silence fell upon them all. Youth is strong; the instinct of life is deep. With one desperate effort the count had freed himself, flinging from him the arms of his would-be murderer. He is out on the window-sill. Another ladder has been found, and placed against the wall; but it, too, is yards

too short. For half a second he hesitates but the madman is behind him, and in another instant will have clutched him back. He jumps. They just see his figure cleaving the air; and then—with a terrible crash the roof has fallen in; and Lord O'Neil has disappeared.

Afterwards the country-people asserted, that, at that supreme moment, an almost unearthly scream had been heard to rise piercingly high above the din and clamor,—the scream of a mother calling to her child. And they swore, too, that it had not come from the lips of the cold, white, handsome woman, who like a statue had stood there motionless, looking on at that dreadful scene. When Ethel looked again, Madame O'Neil was motionless still. Her sister was crouched at her feet, and on her knees lay the poor count's white, solemn face upturned to the stars. The girl's heart stood still. She had seen that same hushed and solemn look upon a face before,—upon her father's as he lay dead in the big drawing-room of the villa at Nice.

The pale dawn of the new year was faintly tinged the eastern sky. Castle Garvagh was burning still, and the stars were looking quietly down at it all. But he lay there upon his mother's lap at rest.

The terrible mystery of that awful night was of course never fully explained. The old prophecy was fulfilled: peace was restored to the family of the O'Neils; but Castle Garvagh was for the third time burnt to the ground. One thing could not be doubted: the conflagration had not been accidental, and it was on all sides accepted that Lord O'Neil had been its author; clearly he had intended Arthur O'Neil's destruction, as well as his own and that of the count, and in his cunning lunacy had devised this fearful hecatomb for them all. The flames had broken out in different parts of the castle simultaneously; but, by a fortunate accident, that portion of it in which his guests were sleeping had not ignited so rapidly as the other part of the house. Providentially, too, no other lives were lost but the count's and his own: the few servants in the castle effected their escape.

How Lord O'Neil had diabolically managed to seduce the unfortunate count into his own apartment at that hour of the night was never known; but it was clear that a mad caprice had converted his affection for the poor young man into a deep hatred, and that he had laid some cunning scheme for his ruin.

A blue sea, a blue sky, and the deep

purple mountains again. Once more it is carnival time at Nice; and the world, gay and gaudy as of yore, is sunning itself upon the Promenade. Gay and gandy, and thoughtless, too, as of old, all unheeding of the gaps which years, as they go swiftly and silently by, make in its ranks, and of the many voices which once have lightly echoed along the same path, and which are now silenced forever.

One or two old friends of our own are there. Amongst them the baron, brisk as a bee, and not a day older than five years ago. He is sheltering himself from the sun's burning rays under the identical white umbrella lined with green beneath which we first made his acquaintance; but, unlike then, his companion now is a lady whose smart little parasol renders her independent of the baron's tent. It is Madame Barbier, trim, plump, smiling. Christine was right after all, and had known what she was about when she had resolved upon making the experiment of life in company with Jules.

The baron was as gallant as ever: at this very moment he was complimenting Madame Barbier on her appearance. "Your cheeks are as fresh as roses, madame," he was telling her, "and your eyes have stolen some of the brightness of the day. And then the toilet! Ha, ha! We are becoming coquette, I see, in our old age. *Ma foi!* I'll have to give Barbier a hint to keep his eyes well open;" and he chuckled gleefully as of old.

"The toilet is new and my best," Christine confessed. "To be sure, baron, one does not come to the Promenade trapped as a grandmother. No, no: I come seldom; but, when I do come, I like to make a good appearance."

"True, madame, you show yourself but seldom; you and your Jules preferring evidently to coo together in a happy retirement like a pair of turtle-doves. Pray, what has coaxed you out of your nest to-day?"

"You know. To meet my friends the O'Neils. They will be here presently."

"Then they really have arrived at last?" the baron inquired eagerly.

"To be sure! Late last night. I saw them for an instant this morning. Ethel is longing to meet you, baron."

"And I her. Is she as charming and distract"—

He paused: his question was answered. A carriage containing two ladies and a gentleman had drawn up close to where he and Madame Barbier were sitting; and a sweet, fresh young voice was calling out, "Baron, baron!"

The violet eyes, the sunny smile, the bright wavy hair,—they were all there. Ethel O'Neil was as pretty and charming as Ethel Mildmay had ever been. Old Mrs. O'Neil remained in the carriage; but Ethel and her husband left it to join their friends. She was dressed from top to toe in black velvet, but black velvet so rich and soft and perfectly made, that the sombre attire was the most becoming thing she could have worn, and, as in the old days, admiring, eager eyes followed her everywhere.

"And well, madame, how goes the world with you?" the baron inquired presently, when the first excitement of the meeting had somewhat subsided, and he and Ethel were walking on together a little in front of Christine and Mr. O'Neil. "But I need not ask;" and he eyed her with a significant smile from head to foot.

"Well, baron,—remarkably well;" and she blushed and laughed.

"And the handsome guardian too! Ah! mademoiselle,—I beg pardon,—madame, I mean, what a clever old fellow I was! Don't you remember how I guessed the end of the story before even it had well commenced?"

"Baron, did you guess it really?"

"To be sure! I saw what our friend there was about from the beginning; and one has but to look at him to see that he is a man to carry out a purpose. He fell in love with you at first sight. Eh, madame?"

"So he says;" and Ethel smiled demurely.

"Of course he did. How could he help it? So did others too; but nobody had a chance against him. Ah the poor little count! the poor little count!" and the old man sighed a half-melancholy, half-amused little sigh.

His companion suddenly paused in her walk, and her eyes were thoughtfully fixed upon the opal waves which were rippling gently upon the white beach. When she raised them, they were dim with gathered tears. "The poor count!" she repeated slowly. "Ah, baron! what a strange, delightful, sad, sad world it is!" and she shuddered slightly.

The baron, as we know, was sceptical, and believed in nothing,—less in the strength and length of a woman's memory than in any thing else. Ethel's pale face and tears dismayed him.

"Come, come, madame," he said with cheerful philosophy: "the wheel of life can't bring good fortune to everybody. Heaven disposes best. How could he have been

happy had he lived? Sooner or later, the fraud would have been discovered. *Mon Dieu!*" as she still wept: "what on earth will your husband say? Husbands are not fond of tears when they are not wept for themselves,—selfish brutes!" and the baron looked at her with an amusing mixture of alarm, dismay, perplexity, and curiosity. Let us tell the truth. For a moment he believed that he had suddenly sprung a mine, and made the terrible discovery of an unhappy *ménage*. But the next instant the suspicion was dispelled to the winds. Just then Arthur O'Neil turned round, and, when he saw his young wife's tears, came quickly to her side. "What is it, Ethel?" he asked anxiously. Greatly interested was our old friend; but, truth to tell, he was quaking in his shoes, for O'Neil was looking with grave inquiry at him.

Ethel's answer explained all. "The baron and I were talking of old times, Arthur," she said. Then a sunny smile shone through the tears. "Baron, I am the happiest woman in the world," she said; "but the present cannot make me forget the past. Arthur knows it," she added simply.

The band struck up a lively strain, the world whirled merrily round. The sun and the sky, and the earth and the sea, were all smiling and sparkling. Pale, sad ghosts haunted the dim, distant past; but happiness was there, close at hand, serene and strong, and Ethel and her husband looked at one another and smiled. The Baron was re-assured, disappointed, perplexed, bewildered. He believed in love—or in something that was uncommonly like it—at last.

